

ACTION SCIENCE ADVENTURE

**NO
81**

AUTHENTIC

SCIENCE FICTION MONTHLY



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editorial



ONE of the things which any minority group has to put up with is the way in which, at irregular intervals, the searchlight of so-called experts is thrown on it in a public dissection. Science fiction, being a minority literature, has had more than its fair share of such examinations. And in each case we have served as a whipping boy to those who profess to know more about the medium than anyone else.

The unfairness lies in that those who do the criticising have nothing to do with the field at all. Learned book critics have torn apart science fiction novels and stories, assessed them by their own private standards and condemned them for being what they are. Writers are blamed for writing science fiction when that is just what the writers set out to do. The entire medium is castigated by people who have never written, or had published, a science fiction story in their lives, who publicly admit that they do not like the field, have no time for it, consider it trash and are only examining it to assure themselves that they were right all the time.

There are exceptions, of course, but by an odd coincidence the books which we regard as science fiction and receive outside praise are not so regarded by the critics. Science fiction, to them, is strictly comic-book, pulp-magazine publications. H. G. Wells, to them, did not write science fiction. Neither did Jules Verne or George Orwell. They wrote literature, *not* science fiction.

So much for the literary critics. I hardly like to think of how the psychologists could go to town if they set their keen, analytical minds to work on the subconscious promptings which have caused the birth of the popular science fiction field.

In fact, it could be fun to anticipate them a little by doing some self-analysis. Words, being what they are, and logic being what it is, it would be the easiest thing in the world to make out a good case for all science fiction readers, writers, and by logical development, publishers, printers, distributors and retailers of any and all science fiction media, to be the most vicious, sadistic, macho-

stic, depraved and amoral types to be found on the entire planet.

The proof is in the bloodshed we have been responsible for.

Vicariously, of course, I doubt if any reader, writer, publisher, printer or distributor has ever harmed a living soul with malicious intent, but psychologists, don't forget, aren't so interested in what someone has done, as what he has thought of doing. And when you apply that standard to our writers they make a pretty poor showing indeed.

I don't know how often the world has been stripped of all living life; with every man, woman and child, dog, cat, and every other animal, not to count the fish and flora, wiped out by atomic or cosmic doom. It would be interesting to discover just how often the Solar System has been devastated by aliens, or how many alien races have been converted to dust by Earthmen. No one can readily tell how many galaxies have been destroyed via the type-writer, or universes for that matter. And every time it happens uncounted millions die.

All right, we'll play it fair and forget the outside planets. But even then I doubt if there is any other field of literature in which the Earth is so regularly destroyed. Atomic doom, cosmic doom, death by plague, death by warfare, death by virus, accident, un-

controlled experiments, death in every shape and form. And not just a small, local death, no, the world or nothing. Once started, there's no stopping our writers from going the whole way.

And what of the future societies in which morals, compassion, charity or justice have no part? The cultures of kill-or-be-killed, the money-worshipping societies, the trends-made-absolute with which we are all so familiar. Healthy thinking? To a psychologist, looking for trouble? What do you think?

Personally, I think that the above is rubbish, but then I'm a part of the field, not an outsider looking on. More specifically, I'm not an outsider looking for a whipping boy or a peg on which to hang a pet theory. To such people, science fiction is the perfect answer; it simply bristles with such pegs. It has to, it's that kind of literature.

With all of time and space, the big and the small, the workings of the mind and the workings of the universe to explore, with every facet of personal relations, the running down of trends and the extrapolation of possibilities, how can such pegs be avoided? In a medium in which there is a premium on imagination, you can't have anything else.

If we did, it wouldn't be science fiction.

E.C.T.

THERE'S ONLY ONE WINNER

by NIGEL LLOYD

Three men and a woman on a blood-stained trail among the stars. Four people who forgot that in the gamble of life there is only one winner.





Illustrated by P. R. Green

The candle was Stanson's. He'd made it from a can of vitapaste, shaping the thick grease around a wick of twisted medical gauze. As a candle it was nothing to boast about, but it gave light and a little heat and it was company of a sort.

Learhy sat on a box and stared at

it. His eyes reflected the flame, glistening as it flared, dulling as it died. Hard eyes in a hard face. A craggy, unhandsome face of planes and hollows and deep-graved lines. It matched his body, a tough, lumpy body without grace, but with a crude, animal strength. He cupped

his chin, his elbows resting on his knees and his hands were like the rest of him, scarred and battered by violence.

The tiny flame guttered and almost died. Learhy tensed, his muscles bunching, then forced himself to relax as the light brightened. Impurities in the grease; too high a water content for steady burning even here where there was no wind, no draught, no stirring of the air to disturb the flame. Vitapaste made a poor fuel, but Stanson had said that the candle would burn until there was nothing left to give it life. And Stanson had known what he talked about.

Learhy turned his eyes to where he rested, his back against the piled boxes, his legs extended over the smooth metal. Stanson the clever one. The one who had tried to be just a little too clever. His eyes were open and his lips twisted into what could have been a grin. In the fitful light both lips and eyes seemed to have movement so that he trembled on the verge of speech and his eyes turned from Learhy towards the candle, from the candle towards Learhy. But it was all a trick of the light. Stanson could neither speak nor see. Stanson was lucky. Stanson was dead.

Learhy ignored him and concentrated on the candle. He stared at it until it filled his vision. A flickering point of light ringed with a yellow numbus, the whole edged with black. A dancing mote of

brilliance hovering above a sagging cylinder of grey. A speck of light and warmth in an infinity of dark and cold. He couldn't stop looking at it.

It measured his life.

THE IDEA had been crazy from the start. Stanson had conceived it, nurtured it, given it final birth. Stanson with the cruel mouth and the shrewd eyes, the thin body and the agile mind. Stanson, who was serving the last month of his term and who shared a cell in Block A with Learhy.

It wasn't a comfortable cell, not by modern standards. It held a couple of bunks, toilet facilities, an outsized calendar and a thin row of books. It was big enough to move around in yet too small for exercise. It was a coop, nothing more, a cage in which to keep the unwanted. Against one wall a telly set flared in light and colour, served by the master-set within the prison.

"Nice programme." Stanson stared appreciatively at the twenty-inch screen. The programme, as usual, concerned itself with women who worried more about their measurements than about their modesty. Learhy didn't comment. He lay on the top bunk, his eyes closed, his head pressing hard against his pillow. He was sweating a little.

"Some dames!" Stanson

smacked his lips. "Makes a man glad to be alive."

"Does it?" Learhy opened his eyes and lifted himself on one elbow. He didn't look at the screen. "How about turning that thing off?"

"The telly? Why?"

"Because I said so." Learhy slipped from the bunk with a sudden release of energy. He reached the set and twisted the knob all in one smooth motion. Silence closed around them, but not for long. Through the air came the hint of music, the echoes of laughter, the transmitted sounds from the other telly sets, one to a cell, five hundred in the block, all operating at full pressure.

Learhy sagged and pressed his hands over his ears.

Torture is sometimes unintentional. The people who had made it their business to provide comforts for the prisoners would have been insulted and hurt had anyone called them sadists, yet that is what they were. How better can you torture a man than by cooping him up, denying him a natural life, and then showing him everything that he is missing? Books weren't too bad; they offered escape into an unreal world, but there was nothing unreal about the telly sets. They pictured real men and women, real comforts, a real way of life. And it was almost impossible to turn them off. Boredom was too

great for any man to deliberately deny himself distraction.

Stanson switched on the screen. "Relax," he warned. "You're not acting natural." He glanced at the spy-mike set in the roof. "Watch yourself or they'll throw you in Psycho and keep you there until you rot."

"Thanks for nothing."

"If that's what you want, then go ahead." Stanson shrugged. "Seems stupid to me though. You'll be out of the can soon, and then the world's yours."

"Sure." Learhy was ironic.

"I mean it." Stanson lowered his voice. "You want that stuff?" His head jerked towards the telly screen. "Well, you can have it."

"Me and a couple of million credits," Learhy agreed. "You got a spare couple of million?"

"Maybe." Stanson's eyes were veiled. "You know Madame Julie's?"

"The dive on Fifty-Eight Avenue? I know it."

"Meet me there when you get out."

"Why?"

"I've got an idea," said Stanson. "A good idea."

Learhy didn't know then how crazy it was.

Madame Julie was fifty years old, and looked it. She was a woman to whom love and credits were one and the same thing, and

charity didn't exist. She looked at Learhy, read his immediate past and probable future and jerked her head towards the door.

"On your way, mister. No handouts."

"I'm not looking for a hand-out." Learhy crushed his quick anger. "I'm looking for a friend." He stepped forward towards the bar, then stopped as she stepped in front of him.

"No trouble," she said softly. "Try anything and you'll regret it."

"I want no trouble. I want a drink." He misread her expression. "I can pay for it."

"Sure you can. You can pay for one, maybe two, and then what? Then you get a little drunk and start an argument."

"On two drinks?"

"You're a con," she said. "You're not used to drinking. With a couple under your belt you'll be feeling high. You'll start annoying the girls, and that'll annoy the customers. For the profit from a couple of drinks it just isn't worth it."

Behind her, the bar door swung open, releasing a mingled odour of whisky, cigarette smoke and perfume. A juke box vied with female laughter in artificial sound. A burly spacer came towards them. He was more than a little drunk and was spoiling for a fight.

"What kind of a joint is this?" he demanded. "A guy spends all his coin and then gets the thumbs down sign from a cheap dame who . . ."

"Watch your mouth, mister!" Julie said sharply. "If you don't like the rules, you don't have to play."

He said something he'd learned in the gutter, then repeated it with elaborations. Learhy, not really caring, but siezing his opportunity, stepped forward, his right fist a fast-moving blur. The spacer grunted, looked foolish, then sagged at the knees. Learhy caught him as he fell.

"Nice work," said Julie. She hadn't moved. "Maybe I could use you."

"You've got your own bouncers." Learhy let the spacer fall. "What happens next?"

"We put him on ice until he recovers. Then we wipe his nose, give him a drink and send him on his way." She shrugged, a slight movement of the shoulders. "No percentage in rolling him; there's more profit in the good rep he'll give the joint." Her fingers fumbled in a belt-bag. "Here. Something for your trouble."

"Thanks." He took the money. "Now to business. You know Stanson?"

"Jack Stanson?" Her eyes grew wary. "Maybe. Why?"

"I'm looking for him. He said for me to meet him here."

"Why didn't you say that before?" She looked at him, examining his face, body and eyes. "Where did you meet?"

"Queensbrough, Block A, name of Learhy. He knows me."

"It's your grief if he doesn't." She gestured towards the stairs. "Wait in number eighteen. Don't go straying."

"Can't I wait in the bar?"

"You'll wait where I tell you. I don't want con-smell upsetting the customers. Anything you want?"

"Nothing I can't pay for." Learhy pushed past her towards the stairs. "Get word to Stanson and tell him not to keep me waiting."

He waited an hour in a dingy room containing a bed, wash-basin, a faded carpet, a wardrobe, empty, and very little else. He killed time by leafing through a heap of tattered magazines and listening to the thunder of jets from the nearby rocket port. He tried to catch a glimpse of the space-ships, but the window opened onto an air shaft and it was impossible to see the sky. From below came the faint sounds of revelry as the joint warmed up for the night. At the end of an hour he ran out of patience and was heading towards the door when Stanson arrived. He wasn't alone.

"Glad you made it," he said. "This is Klien. Klien, meet Learhy. We went to the same school."

"Just out?" Klien was a pudgy, heavy-set man with bloodshot eyes and a haunted expression. His clothes were poor and his breath stank of whisky. He held out a clammy hand. "How long were you in?"

"Too long." Learhy dropped the hand.

Stanson pushed the pudgy man towards the door. "Now that you've met, you'd better get sociable. Go down to the bar and collect a couple of bottles. Tell Julie to put them on my account." He waited until they were alone. "Don't make a snap judgment, Learhy. Klien is one of the best."

"The best of what?"

"He's a good man." Stanson produced cigarettes, offered one to Learhy, lit them both. He lit them with an inlaid gas lighter which must have cost the best part of a month's wages for an average man. His clothes reflected his prosperity. Next to him Learhy felt shabby and pale. Stanson chuckled, tossing the lighter from hand to hand.

"A week of good eating, some sun-lamp treatment and a new suit will fix you up. Nothing like a coat of tan to get rid of the con-smell."

"Throw in a trip to the North Pole while you're at it," said Learhy dryly. "Nothing like a good vacation to get a man on his feet again."

"Now you're talking." Stanson pocketed the lighter. "There's little a smart man can't get, not if he wants it bad enough."

"Like Klien?"

"Klien's all right."

"He's a drunk." Learhy inhaled, holding the smoke in his lungs before letting it gush from between his lips. "I don't trust a man who gets his kicks from a bottle."

"You can trust Klien all the way."

"I trust no one that far."

"Maybe you're right, but you can trust Klien as far as you can trust anyone." Stanson was serious. Learhy shrugged, not wanting to make an issue of it.

"He's still a drunk in my book."

Klien returned before Stanson could answer. He pushed open the door and marched into the room, a bottle in each hand. He set one down on the table, tore the cork from the other and helped himself to a long drink. He stood, bottle in hand, looking at Learhy. "I heard what you said."

"So?"

"So you got it wrong. I drink, yes, but I don't drink to get a

lift. I drink to stop getting depressed. There's a difference, you know."

"Not enough to make it important." Learhy dropped his cigarette, stepped on it and looked at Stanson. "You said for me to meet you. I'm here. What happens now?"

"There is a difference," insisted Klien. "Most men drink to get a kick, but I'm not like that. I've got to drink to keep normal. If I don't drink then I hit bottom."

"Shut up." Learhy didn't feel like swapping philosophy with the pudgy man. "I'm waiting, Stanson. What do we do now?"

"We talk." Stanson drew up chairs, tossed his cigarettes on the table and sat down. Klien, after tilting the bottle again, joined him. Learhy stood by his chair.

"Talk?"

"The prelude to action. We talk big, think big and then, when everything's settled, we act big."

"How big?" Learhy wasn't impressed; he'd heard con-talk before.

"I don't know." Stanson helped himself to a fresh cigarette. "How big is big? Ten million? Twenty? You tell me."

"No." Learhy sat down and rested his hands on the table. "You tell me."

"I'll tell you," promised Stan-

son. "I'll tell you all about it." He started and Learhy listened to the great idea.

It was crazy; as crazy as the concept of writing with a ball instead of a nib, as stupid as the idea of being able to talk through the air without the aid of wires. It was so crazy that it might even work.

Stanson wanted to steal a spaceship.

In a world ridden by officialdom, strangled by red tape and clogged by countless forms in triplicate, the forger comes into his own. Men are no longer men, but the papers they carry. The passport, visa, identification slip, travel order, ticket, insurance certificate, tax clearance papers, union card, bank book, health form, they, and a dozen other scraps of paper, all go to prove that the person carrying them is the person they claim him to be. Officials stare at forms, not men. Pass forms, not men, and, if the forms are in order, then they are happy.

Learhy hoped they would stay happy.

He stood in a line of a couple of dozen men and tried to relax as he neared the examining officer. Before him, Stanson waited his turn, smoking, despite the notice forbidding it. Behind him, Klien, looking hangdog and harried from

lack of whisky, shuffled almost last in line. Learhy didn't turn to look at him. He was playing a part and had to remember to keep in character. He was a worker bound under contract to the waste disposal workings on the Moon. And he had papers to prove it.

Ahead of him a minor Hitler snapped to outraged protest at Stanson's lack of discipline.

"You there! Kill that butt!"

Stanson inhaled, looking everywhere but at the irate official.

"You——!" Somewhere the man had picked up some gutter-filth. He used it with relish. Stanson looked startled, dropped the cigarette, trod on it and sheepishly approached the examiner muttering apologies. The examiner swore at him, made some threats as to what would happen if he didn't watch himself, glanced at his papers and passed him through. Learhy relaxed as Stanson passed through the shed and out onto the field. He tightened again as the man before him ran into trouble.

"These papers aren't in order." The examiner scowled at them. "They should have been stamped by the tax people." He threw them back. "I can't pass you."

"Why not?" The man wanted to argue. "If I miss this shuttle I'll be docked or fined for contract-breaking. Hell, why should I suffer because some snotty-nosed clerk didn't do his job?"

"I can't pass you." The examiner was firm, and Learhy realized why Stanson had acted as he did. Divert their attention from the papers to the man and things were that much easier. You can't examine two things at once, not closely, not if you're pressed for time. He tripped over his own feet as he walked to the desk, the papers fluttering from his hand. He picked them up, dusted them, passed them over.

"Joe Milton," he babbled. "Two-year contract with Atomic Waste Disposals, Inc. Good job, eh?"

"Some people say so." The examiner riffled the sheaf of documents.

"They told me it was a good job," insisted Learhy. "Good food, good pay and plenty of recreation." He winked. "I sure could use some of that recreation."

"First-timer, aren't you?" The examiner was amused. He knew what this man apparently didn't, that working for Waste Disposals was a thin step above working for the devil. Handling radioactive sludge was a job only the desperate would accept. The desperate or the dumb.

"That's right." Learhy stabbed at the papers with a grimy finger. "They tell me it's tough, but I'm healthy and can take it. See? On that form there somewhere. See?"

"I see." The examining officer

turned away his head as Learhy breathed into his face. Artificial halitosis was a good inducement not to relish a man's company. The thud of the rubber stamp signalled Learhy to be on his way.

Outside the shed a guard pointed to where the shuttle-rocket stood waiting. Learhy didn't look for Stanson; he would already be aboard, and he dared not wait for Klien: that would be out of character. Not that he had to worry about Klien. When a man makes three sets of false papers, common sense dictates that he keep the best set for himself.

A crewman guided him to a thin anti-G mattress and clipped him down. The shuttle was small, overloaded with cheap human freight, and the air system needed an overhaul. Lying in the dim, blue-lit darkness, Learhy listened to transmitted sound. A mutter of voices, a curse, a whimper, then the clang of metal as the entry port was sealed and the whine of a siren. Idly he wondered what had happened to the three men whose place they had taken. He didn't wonder for long. The shock of take-off gripped him and left room for nothing but pain.

There are two ways to leave planet. One is the easy way, a slow and gentle lift using plenty of fuel and taking plenty of time.

That was the way the custom trade used with multi-millionaires, the glamour girls, the delicate, super-valuable freight who could afford to pay for the best. The other way was to load up a rocket and fire it off like a gun, hitting escape velocity in the shortest time with the minimum of fuel. It was cheap, but it was hell on the cargo.

Learhy opened his eyes after the initial black-out and felt as if he had been beaten all over with rubber clubs. Once he had so been beaten and the sensation was the same. He ran his tongue over his teeth and tasted blood. He tried to move, failed, then remembered the straps. On the third try he managed to unclip himself and drifted from the mattress.

Immediately, he was sick. It was a horrible, retching nausea which tore at his stomach and made him wish for death. Weakly, he clung to the edge of the mattress, fighting the ghastly sensation of falling . . . falling . . . falling . . . which was the result of free fall.

A crewman came down from the control room. He was a short, stocky man, red-haired and impatient. He wore magnetized boots and walked with the painfully acquired skill of long practice. Learhy lifted his head as the man approached, tried to speak and was sick again. The crewman

swore with a savage bitterness.

"Get back on that couch, sludger! You want to foul up the air system?"

"The head." Learhy made weak gestures. "Got to go to the head."

"You ain't going nowhere." The crewman was strong, stronger in the absence of gravity. He lifted Learhy as if he were a child, clipping him down with a vicious tightening of the straps. "You stay there till we land."

"The head." Learhy could think of nothing else.

"Do what you got to do where you are." The crewman glowered around the compartment. "Hear that you sludgers? No one moves for no reason. We touch-down in five hours, then you can clean up the mess." He walked off, his boots ringing on the floor.

Five hours can be a short time or a long time, depending on circumstances. To Learhy it seemed like eternity. He fought a losing struggle against the straps clipping him to the mattress, the crewman had jerked them too tight and they were cutting off the circulation. Cramps came after a while and he tried yelling for help. None came. He tried appealing to Stanson and Klien, but they were either unconscious or just didn't care. He ended up by cursing the shuttle, the crew and everyone alive in the compart-

ment with prison-filth. Then the deceleration slammed at him and brought welcome black-out.

He recovered to find a crewman unclipping him and heaving him to his feet. He swayed, biting his lips against the pain of returning circulation, then stumbled and fell in the low gravity as the man shoved him towards the entry port.

"Get moving, sludger! The crawler ain't waiting."

Painfully, Learhy staggered to the port. Other men bumped into him, all of them looking the worse for wear. Two of them carried a limp burden and Learhy recognized Klien. Stanson caught his arm as he moved forward.

"Leave him."

"But . . ."

"Leave him." Stanson wiped a smear of blood from his upper lip. "Too soft," he said. "All of us, too soft to take it."

It was the truth, and none of them had foreseen the danger. Long years in jail don't help a man's muscles, and Klien had lived on the bottle for too long. Compared to the others they were physical weaklings. The forged papers had claimed strength for them, but hadn't been able to give it.

"What do we do?" Learhy kept his voice low, talking prison-wise from the corner of his mouth. "With Klien out, what do we do?"

"Play it straight." Stanson led the way into the flexible tube connecting the shuttle to the crawler. "Play it straight and wait our chance."

He dabbed again at his bleeding nose.

Playing it straight meant doing the work they were supposed to do, acting up to the documents which had got them to the Moon. Klien was the lucky one. He rested in hospital while ruptured blood vessels healed and torn ligaments regained their strength. As a manual worker he was finished, but he was on the Moon, under contract to Atomic Disposals and they wanted their pound of flesh. They gave him a job in supply, warned him not to be too generous, then sat back and let him work himself deeper in debt.

"It's hell," he complained a week after release from hospital. "I've got to issue the protective clothing to those poor guys and they won't let me do the job straight."

"You've got it soft." Stanson looked at his hands, once white and soft, now calloused and black with ingrained dirt. "You want to get into a suit and start handling those containers for a change."

"When do we get moving?" Learhy was getting impatient. For

weeks now he had sweated with fear and exertion as he transhipped the sludge cans from the power stations on Earth, spilling the radioactive residues into the disposal pits and knowing all the time he was making a gambler's play with death. Theoretically, he was safe. Theoretically, he would come to no harm providing the cans were sealed and providing his suit was cool and that his exposure time was kept below minimum danger level.

But no one could be certain about the cans, not after their trip up from Earth. The spilling machinery was obsolete and required too much manual handling. The suits were too hot and the working time too long. Most of the three-month workers had radiation burns; all of the six-month workers suffered from over-exposure. Learhy wanted to get out and get out fast.

"I'm working on that." Stanson glanced about the recreation room in which the workers were permitted to spend their off-duty time. A few men hunched over a viewer; they had shared the price of a fifteen minute film. Another group had gathered around a poker game and a couple of rare ones were wasting time and money writing letters of protest to the newspapers back on Earth.

"How working?" Learhy lit and dragged at a cigarette. He was nervous with impatience; in

imagination he could already feel the radiation burns on his skin.

"It takes planning." Stanson wasn't to be rushed. "I explained it all once and I don't want to keep on yapping about it. The first step went without a hitch, didn't it?"

"The first step landed us in the next worse thing to jail. Aside from Klien, we'd be better off in the can."

"You think I've got it easy?" Klien was offended. "Think again if you think that." He looked harried and miserable. "God, what would I give for a drink! I need a drink real bad."

"Write yourself a ticket for a couple of bottles." Learhy was contemptuous.

Stanson shook his head. "Don't blow your top, Learhy. We need Klien. We've got to work as a team; if not, then we're sunk."

"Am I arguing?" Smoke gushed from Learhy's mouth, but despite his impatience he had to admit that, so far, Stanson's crazy idea had worked out. The first part, at least. To operate the plan they had to get off planet, and he had arranged that. The next part didn't seem so easy.

Waste Disposals was on the Dark Side of the Moon, the side away from Earth. The general landing field was at Tycho Station almost 3,000 miles away. From the Station the big interplanetary

ships left for the Tri-Planet run, and all ships with passengers and cargo for Earth had to land there. Tycho was the quarantine station, customs depot and supply point.

"We'll have to wait until we're due for a recreation period," said Stanson. "The company run a shuttle once a month for all those who can afford to pay the return fare. It stays a couple of days at the station picking up mail and flash-stuff for the bosses." He sucked at his teeth. "We'll be on that shuttle."

"We'll need papers," said Learhy. "They'll send out an alarm when we don't turn up." He looked at Klien. "Can you fix it?"

"No." The pudgy man looked as if he were almost ready to cut his throat and so end his misery. "It takes time to rig papers," he explained. "Time and the right equipment. I've no inks, pens, paper, and I can't work without a drink inside of me." He thrust out his right hand; it was quivering. "See?"

Stanson's nudge interrupted Learhy's comment. A couple of foremen swaggered through the recreation room, their outside boots tearing at the chipped concrete of the floor. They scowled at the three men, seemed about to say something, then moved across to the group around the viewer. One of them deliberately jerked out the cable, cutting short the

film. The group dissolved, not wanting to argue about the lost price.

Learhy half-rose. "Damn screws." His big hands clenched at his sides. "I hate screws."

"Sit on it," snapped Stanson. "What are those gimps to you?" His fingers dug into the other's arm. "Sit down and listen. We've got to get to Tycho, remember?"

"And that takes money," chipped in Klien. "Cash on the nail."

That was the least of their worries.

Criminals have no ethics, and honour among thieves is a myth. Learhy raised the money by the simple process of robbery, beating up one man who challenged him so badly that he had to go into the hospital. With money to flash they were permitted on the shuttle and arrived at Tycho two days before the terminator was due. The pilot took them through the lock, uttered the customary warning as to what would happen to them if they missed the return trip, and went about his own business. His warning was wasted. They had trouble enough waiting for them back at the workings and didn't intend returning to collect it. But staying in Tycho wasn't all that easy.

The Station had started as a dome and had continued that

way. Around and above the original dome others had risen, thin, strong skins of plastic pressurized from within. A big meteor would rupture the skins, but big meteors, those above a few grains, were scarce. Even if they did hit the Station the air-loss would be slight and the minor damage quickly repaired by the Air-Techs. The Station was a self-contained unit which was impossible to enter or leave without permission, and a city like that is a jail. And Tycho was a jail with its own, peculiar laws.

Learhy sat on a hard cot in a room smaller and more bare than the cell in which he had spent five weary years. A cigarette dangled from his lips. It had cost twenty times its price on Earth, part of the extra being the tax for the added oxygen consumption smoking it would entail. A meter-fitted water faucet decorated a wall, a chipped beaker on a shelf above it. He looked up as the door slid open and Klien squeezed into the room.

The forger was cheerful again; the reason was in the bottle he produced from a pocket. He tilted it, smacked his lips, passed it over. Learhy coughed over the raw spirit, the by-product of the yeast vats. "What is this, rocket fuel?"

"For me it's a lack of depression." Klien gestured towards

the tap. "Dilute it if you want. Me, I'll take it as it comes."

Learhy grunted, took the beaker from the shelf and swore as the tap remained dry. He fumbled in his pocket, thrust in a coin and got five ounces of water in exchange for sixty minutes of manual labour. He cursed as he added liquor to the sterile water. "Damn slice joint! They've rigged the meter."

"Survival of the fittest," said Klien. "Without papers who are we to argue?"

Learhy's face darkened as he gulped his drink. The underworld extends wherever men congregate, and those who live outside the law can always find somewhere to roost—at a price. He flung the empty beaker against the wall. The plastic shattered and fell to the concrete floor.

"Five days!" he stormed. "Five stinking days holed up in this coop, paying through the nose for everything we get."

"It won't last much longer." Klien was in an alcoholic euphoria. "Things will break soon."

"Yeah, they'll break just as soon as we can't pay these harpies to keep us under cover." Learhy clenched his hands. "When are we going to move?"

"When Stanson gives the word."

"When will that be?" Learhy

took two strides, turned, took two more and arrived back from where he'd started. "It's dark outside, isn't it?"

"The terminator hit us three days ago." Klien tilted the bottle and finished what it contained. "Doesn't help us much."

"You check the hotels?"

"As best as I could." Klien shrugged. "Not a hope. Those places are sewed up tight with guards. We couldn't even get into the sector."

"Lousy city! Lousy damn city!" Learhy was burning with impatient rage. Inaction always irritated him, and he had the old, familiar feeling of imminent trouble. It was the criminal instinct, the nervous tension of those who depend on hunches and intuition. Something was wrong and he didn't know what it was. All he knew was that he wanted to get moving and keep moving. He glared at Klien.

"There are tourists walking the domes, aren't there? Flash guys with their dolls? Easy money if you want it."

"I've scanned the joint." Klien refused to be annoyed. "Tourists and the money-crowd are kept behind bars away from the scum. If they want to go slumming they go covered by guards. With the clothes you're wearing and the way you look you wouldn't get within shouting distance of them. You'd be grabbed."

"Maybe." Learhy had his own ideas. "It could be worked," he urged. "If we plan it right we could, maybe, lift a wallet." He bared his teeth at Klien's expression. "You getting soft?"

"I don't like violence."

"You'll get a belly-full when we get kicked out, and maybe reported for the reward. The guards back at the workings will have your hide, and what they leave the men we robbed will finish. You want that?"

"Geeson won't report us." Klien didn't look as confident as he sounded. "We paid him well and promised him more. He won't turn us in."

"Geeson's a rat. He wouldn't hide out his own mother unless she could pay." Learhy jerked out the lining of his pocket. "I'm strapped. No coin. Nothing. You?"

"The same. Stanson took all I had." Klien looked nervously towards the door. "Are you sure about Geeson?"

"I don't know." Learhy hunched his shoulders, fighting the mounting sense of urgency within him. "I've got a feeling that something's wrong. I had it the last time when the coppers grabbed me, and I've got it now. I . . ." He broke off at a knock on the door. He jerked open the panel and stared at the girl outside.

She was tall, slender to the point of thinness, her dark eyes huge in the whiteness of her face. Her clothing was cheap and did little for her figure, but she had tried to improve it with a wide belt of gold flexmetal. A second strip of the same material bound her long, blue-black hair. She was one of Geeson's daughters, a courtesy title only, and she was both scared and angry.

"Let me in." She leaned against the inner side of the panel, her lips red in the light of the glow-tube. "You're in trouble," she said. "Bad trouble."

"Geeson?" Learhy wasted no time. His hard fingers dug into the soft flesh of her shoulder. "He calling copper?"

"You know?"

"I guessed. Is he?"

"Yes." She winced and Learhy released his grip. "I heard him talking to one of the runners. Seems that there's a reward out for you; at least there's one out for three men who broke their contract with Waste Disposals. Geeson wants to collect it."

"If he turns us in then he'll be in trouble for hiding us." Klien looked baffled. "Doesn't he know that?"

"Geeson's got an in with the guards. They make the capture and he splits the reward." She shrugged, her face cynical. "It happens all the time."

"Geeson." Learhy made a sound deep in his throat. "Where is he?"

"You going to kill him?" The girl wetted her lips in anticipation. Her eagerness checked Learhy's anger.

"Is that what you want?" His fingers reached for her shoulder again. She twisted away, glaring defiance. "Well?" He dropped his hand. "Is it?"

"He took a whip to me." She bared her teeth at the memory. "Beat me as if I was a dog. I told him then that I'd get even, and now I am. Kill him, mister. Kill him good."

"Wait!" Klien was thoughtful. "What's your name, girl?"

"Lorna."

"Geeson told me about you. Always making trouble, aren't you? Hard to handle, he said, and said to be careful if you tried anything." The pudgy man let out his breath in a sigh of relief. "Relax, Learhy, the girl's trying to needle you into doing her dirty work. Geeson's not going to report us; she just wants you to think he is."

"Is that the way it is?" Learhy wasn't too surprised; he'd lived in the underworld too long to be shocked or startled at the ways of men and women intent on their own ends. But he didn't like to be used.

"You can think that if you

want." Her contempt was obvious. "But don't blame anyone but yourself when the guards grab you." She took a step forward. "Geeson will flay me if he ever finds out I warned you. Do me a favour, mister. When they grab you, just don't tell anyone that I came here." She reached for the door, then stiffened as Learhy's hand closed over hers.

"He took a whip to you, you said?"

"That's right." She looked into his face. "He beat me, and I can prove it." Before either man could move she had unzipped her clothing, pulled the thin fabric over her shoulders and bared her back down to the waist. The delicate skin was traced with a criss-cross of angry red lines.

"Still think I'm lying?" She wriggled back into her dress.

"You've been whipped," said Learhy thickly. "That's for sure."

"So she's been beaten." Klien waved his hand. "So what? Dames like her are always stepping out of line. But that doesn't mean that Geeson's going to sell us out. It just means that she's mad at him and wants you to get her revenge."

It was logical, either way it was logical, and, if it hadn't been for his own instinct, Learhy might have accepted Klien's explanation. But he had lived on the thin edge of danger for too long to ignore

the signs. He opened the door and jerked his head at Klien.

"We're getting out of here."

"Why? The girl's lying."

"Maybe." Learhy didn't want to argue about it. "But we're leaving just the same."

He led the way into the passage, running past the cubicles, heading for the stairs which led to the lower floor. Halfway down he froze, his body stiffening at the sound of voices. Heavy feet echoed from the plastic as men climbed upwards and a figure came into view. It was a thick-set figure wearing the hated uniform of those who upheld the law.

Lorna hadn't been lying.

What happened next happened fast. There was a brief, split-second pause of mutual recognition, then, as the guard snatched at the ion gun at his waist, Learhy was on his way downstairs. He didn't walk or run, he simply flung his entire body forward and down, turning himself into a living missile of bone and muscle. The low gravity helped, that and the strength of his legs, but what helped most of all was the speed in which he acted.

The guard touched his gun, drew it, then went down beneath a hundred and eighty pounds of fighting fury. Learhy wasted no time on a second blow; the man was either dead or unconscious,

but the guard wouldn't have been alone. He snatched the fallen ion gun, rolled as a blue finger swung towards him, and triggered a bolt at the second guard. His aim was poor, but good enough. The man doubled in uncontrollable muscular spasms as the charge dispersed through his body.

"Back!" Learhy raced up the stairs yelling at the others. "Up! Get up!"

"Where to?" Klien grabbed at Learhy's arm. "Where are we going?"

"The girl will tell us." Learhy knocked aside the hand and reached for Lorna. "Is there a way out of this warren? The roof, maybe? A window?"

"The roof." Her long legs gleamed white through the slits in her skirt as she ran upstairs. They passed rows of blank-doored cubicles, each probably containing a human being. No one was curious enough or foolish enough to open a door. Behind them the air began to smell of ozone as the guards, taking time to fire up each flight, came after them.

"Here." Lorna halted and pointed upwards to where a trap showed in the ceiling. "That leads to the roof."

"Good." Learhy glanced down the last flight, thrust the ion gun into her hand and grabbed at Klien. "Cover us, girl. You can use a gun?"

"Never had to yet."

"Point it and pull the trigger at anything which moves." Learhy heaved Klien's bulk upwards. "Open it and reach down for us."

Klien grunted as Learhy almost threw him upwards. His hands and head thudded against the trap. It didn't move, and agonizing seconds passed while he searched for, and found, the lock. It swung back, letting in a gust of cool air and a glimpse of the artificial lights strung on the inner surface of the dome.

"Hurry." Lorna crouched at the foot of the stairs. "They're getting closer."

"Give me the gun." Learhy took it, thrust it into his belt, picked up the girl and threw her slender weight towards the trap. He waited until she was through, flexed his legs and flung himself towards the opening. He was almost clear when a bolt touched the calf of his left leg. He rolled, grinning with agony, as Klien slammed shut the trap and sat on it.

"They get you?" Lorna was anxious.

"My leg." Learhy pounded at the numbed muscles. "I can't use it."

"Let me help." Her fingers were surprisingly deft as they probed at the knotted mass of sinew. "Better?"

"Good enough." Learhy tested the limb, wincing at the pain from his semi-paralysed muscles. Klien, safe on the non-conductive plastic, called to him.

"They're getting restless, Learhy. I can't hold them much longer." He looked worried. "Where do we go from here?"

"Over the roofs and up onto the higher level." Learhy gestured towards the thin span of a fly-over. "Once we get away from the area we stand a chance."

"With these guards on our tail we won't stand any chance at all." Klien swore as the trap heaved beneath him. "Not counting the guards who will be watching around the building."

"If we move fast we can dodge them." Learhy scowled down at the trap. Once Klien removed his weight the guards would come boiling out onto the roof. Dodging the cordon guards was just possible; they would take time to get into position, but to dodge the ones below wasn't so easy. It would be impossible unless they could get a start. Learhy stood on the trap.

"Get moving," he ordered. "Make for the fly-over; you can jump the gaps and reach it without too much trouble. Move!"

They obeyed the iron in his voice and he stood watching them as they sprang to the roof of the next building. Gun in hand, he

tensed, then, deliberately, stepped well away from the trap.

It flung open to a haze of blue, the ion beams lancing in almost every direction.

Luck saved Learhy, that and the fact that one man, no matter how quick or clever, cannot cover three hundred and sixty degrees with any weapon without a time lag. The guard fired blind, then, as he saw Learhy, tried to correct his aim. He never got the chance.

He sagged as Learhy's bolt knocked him unconscious, sagged and fell as the guard supporting him felt the shock of the dispersed charge. In the brief moment before other guards could resume the fire, Learhy sprang forward, jerking back the trigger of his weapon. The opening in the roof became hazed with blue and the stench of ozone wafted to his nostrils. Satisfied, Learhy turned and ran for the edge of the roof, leaping hard from the parapet. Almost he missed the opposite roof, his still-numb leg hampering his spring. Desperately, he clawed his way to safety, raced at top speed towards the fly-over and gained it just as the guards opened fire.

"Made it." Klien sucked at his lips. "Never saw anyone move so fast in all my life."

"We've got to keep moving." Learhy lurched to his feet. "You know where we'd be safe, girl?"

"Joel's Bar, down by the loading area. He owes me a favour and he's no friend of Geeson's." She brushed down her skirt. "Let's get moving. The guards will turn the Warren inside out after what you've done. They don't like collecting their own medicine." She glanced at the ion gun in Learhy's hand. "Better ditch that thing."

"I'll take care of it." Learhy tucked it out of sight. Klien glanced back towards the opposite roof and hastily followed Learhy and the girl.

"Stanson," he said. "We've got to find Stanson. If he walks back into that mess then we're sunk."

Learhy didn't answer. He didn't know where Stanson was.

Stanson was watching the loading area facing the big, commercial exit ports. The area was brilliant with light from overhead glow-tubes and men toiled like ants as they manhandled crated supplies for the ships waiting outside. He wasn't alone. Around him other men waited, casual workers eager for a few hours employment. They were a thin, underfed, scrawny bunch, most with dependants, all without hope. They made good cover.

Stanson waited and watched, and thought about his great idea. The twenty-second century

was a time of extremes. The wealthy were impossibly rich, the poor utterly dejected. They had their artificial amusements, but they had no pride. They were serfs in an economic feudal system more rigorous than any previously known. But a strong man, a bold man, could, if he were audacious enough and ruthless enough, break his way free of the system.

Stanson thought that he had found the way.

The ships were the answer; the big, interplanetary vessels which travelled between the worlds. Filled with costly cargo, crammed with pleasure-seeking tourists, they held more wealth than a man could imagine. Stanson wanted that money. He wanted to reach out and take what he wanted so that he could enjoy life to the full. It was risky, yes, but with the right help and the right plan it could be done. He was willing to risk his life on it.

A guard walked towards the waiting men. He halted a few feet from the wire-mesh barrier cutting off the loading area.

"Nothing this shift," he said. "No sense in waiting." He lifted his voice as no one moved. "You heard me, you guys. Quit cluttering up the fence. Beat it!"

Stanson waited until the others had sulked away, then spoke

before the guard could challenge him.

"Just a visitor," he said quickly. "Just looking at what makes the wheels turn." He gestured towards the area. "Are all the ships loaded from here?"

"Sure." The guard accepted a cigarette, tucked it in his pocket. "Where're you working?"

"Air-Tech, start duty next shift." Stanson hoped his clothes wouldn't betray him. They were shabby but not exceptionally so, and their cut was expensive. He drew at his cigarette. "Anything due to leave soon?"

"The *Aphrodite* is lifting within the hour." The guard pointed to where a big Tri-Planet ship waited on the plain. "The *Rover III* is taking off after."

"Is that the one? That small one?"

"Yeah. Charter ship taking a party on a tour." The contempt in the guard's voice was plain. "My old man wouldn't have called it that."

"I get it." Stanson pointed with his cigarette towards a slender vessel towards the edge of the landing field. "And that one?"

"The *Armitage*?" The guard shrugged. "Regular run with fine cargo and top-class passengers. Due out for Mars in about ten hours." He yawned. "Wish I was going on her."

"Nice ship?"

"The best." The guard yawned again. "Hell! I'll be glad to hit the sack."

"A pity." Stanson jingled some coins in his pocket. "I was hoping that maybe you and me could dip the bill. Should I call back when you're off duty?"

"Some other time." The guard looked regretful at the loss of the proffered drink. "I've five hours to go, and then straight home or catch hell from the old woman. You know how it is."

"I can guess." Stanson shook his head. "Women are the devil."

"You said it." The guard shrugged. "Had a night of it last night and now I've got to make the peace. You working for Air-Tech, you say?"

"That's right."

"I'll be looking for you. Me and the boys generally drop in for a snort over at Joel's Bar. See you there maybe?"

"Sure." Stanson turned away, his face thoughtful. The guards changed shifts in five hours time, the *Armitage* was due to leave in ten. Close, but it might just be done. Deep in thought, he walked back towards the Warren then jerked to sudden awareness as he turned a corner.

The place was hot. It was so hot it was smoking. Two cop-cars stood in the street and guards were everywhere. Stanson ducked

out of sight, his stomach knotted with tension. He jumped and turned, hands half-lifted, as someone touched his elbow.

"You took your time," said Lorna. She jerked her head and Stanson followed her through a maze of narrow passageways darkened by the fly-overs above. "Learhy and Klien are safe." She answered his unspoken question. "Geeson sold you out. I learned what he was doing and carried the word. I planted your friends and came back to catch you if I could."

"I know you?"

"Lorna, one of Geeson's girls." She shrugged thin shoulders. "No more though, not now. You can trust me."

"Where are the others?" Stanson wasted no time on unessentials. She had saved him from walking into a trap, and that was good enough to be going on with. He swore as she told him. "Joel's Bar! That's where the port guards hang out."

"Joel knows his business," she said calmly, and laughed at his expression. "Well, smart guy? You want to come with me or do you want to take your chances?"

Put like that, there was no alternative.

Joel was a man of indeterminate age, nationality and occupation. His hair was dark, but that

could have been dye. His speech was rough, but that could have been camouflage. His clothing was poor, but he resided in a poor area. He ran a small bar, the haunt of dock workers and port guards, and it seemed to give him profit enough to pay protection and leave a little over.

Appearances are deceptive. Joel could have lived at a tourist hotel and kept servants. He could have lived easy and eaten rich every day of his life. His real occupation, the one which provided all his wealth, while not the oldest, was certainly no youngster. He was a smuggler.

"I've been waiting for you guys." He drew slowly at an imported cigar. "Who is the boss-man?"

"Talk to me," said Stanson quickly. Learhy shrugged, not wanting to argue. Klien, happy with a bottle, beamed around the small room in which they sat.

"I know the background," said Joel. "We can skip that. What are your plans for the future?"

"We just want to get along," said Stanson. "I was hoping that we could get a berth on a ship."

"Without union cards, papers or cash?" Joel didn't shrug, but his voice sounded as if he had. "Three contract-breakers like you wouldn't stand a chance of getting past the barrier." He inhaled

again, savouring the smoke with obvious relish. "And you can't bribe the guards, either."

"I wasn't thinking of that."

"No? For days now you've been hanging around the loading area. You've talked to guards and dock workers, and, to me, that only adds up to one thing. You want information and you want it bad. If you were legitimate you could get it from the shipping office, but you daren't risk that. So you did it the hard way. The stupid way."

"Why stupid?" Stanson was always willing to learn.

"The hard way is always the stupid way," said Joel. "You made yourself suspicious, and for a man in your position that's stupid." He brushed a little ash from his cigar. "You want to ship out?"

"Yes."

"Any particular place you want to get to?"

"No." Stanson looked hopeful. "Can you help us?"

Joel took his time answering. "Things like that cost money," he said gently. "Plenty of money."

"We'll find it," promised Stanson.

"How?" Joel let his eyes drift from one to the other. "Tycho's pretty well sewed up, and the sort of game you have in mind wouldn't pay. Violence isn't necessary to rob the tourists, and it isn't

wanted. Try it and there'll be trouble, plenty of trouble." He busied himself with his cigar. "We don't want trouble."

"What you want doesn't worry me," said Learhy suddenly. He was getting tired of this cross-talk. "If you've a deal in mind let's hear it. If you haven't then stop wasting air."

"I've a deal," admitted Joel. He wasn't annoyed. Plain speaking men are usually to be trusted—within limits. "Lorna told me about you," he continued. "From the first I knew who and what you were." He smiled up at the girl. "Part of my intelligence service, you might say."

"Skip the hearts and flowers." Learhy was impatient. "What's the deal?"

"I can get you off the Moon," said Joel. "How I manage it is my business. It won't be easy, but it can be done. I've a skipper who owes me a favour, and he'll take you and drop you somewhere. You said it didn't matter where."

"And in return?"

"One of you is a penman." Joel glanced at Klien. "I've some documents I'd like worked on, shipping lists, permits for imports, stuff like that. You fix the papers and I'll fix the passage."

"You know a lot," said Learhy tightly. He looked at the girl. "Your intelligence service?"

"Maybe." Joel's smile was bland. "That and loose talk. The alcohol is pretty strong here, you know." He got back to business. "Let's skip the recriminations. Is it a deal?"

"It could be," said Stanson. "Klien will work on your papers for," he glanced at the watch on his wrist, "for seven hours. At the end of that time you get us on board the *Armitage*."

"The *Armitage*?" Joel looked blank. "Why that ship in particular?"

"That's my business. Is it a deal?"

"But you'll be caught, grabbed as stowaways, charged at port of landing." Joel was baffled. "Is that what you want?"

"Is it a deal?" Stanson was insistent.

"Sure, if that's the way you want it." Joel shook his head. "But I don't get it. What's the point of jumping into trouble?" He looked sharply at Lorna as she drew in her breath with an audible hiss. "Can you understand it?"

"What does it matter?" Lorna was casual. "Make the deal and let's get it over." She followed Learhy as he left the room, Joel already getting out papers and equipment for Klien to start work. "Learhy!"

"What is it?"

"Joel's a fool," she said simply.

"He's smart in a lot of things, but he's got a cash-register mind. You know, all profit and loss. If he can't figure the profit, then he can't see the motive." Her hand rested on his arm, the fingers digging into the flesh. "Me, I'm different."

"You're a kid."

"You grow fast in Tycho. You grow double fast with a man like Geeson. You get appetites too, and sometimes you can see the way to get rid of them." The fingers dug deeper. "I'm coming with you, Learhy."

"You crazy?"

"Sure, as crazy as you are. Crazy enough to see what could happen when three men get working on a ship stuffed with tourists." She laughed in his face. "That's the great idea, isn't it? The one Klien talked about when I loosened his tongue. The one thing which is going to . . ."

He moved so fast that she had no chance to avoid his hands. They wrapped around her throat, the thumbs crushing her windpipe. His voice, as he spoke in her ear, was a snarl.

"You talk too much and too loud. Watch your tongue or I'll fix it for good." He drew her close as a couple of dock hands swaggered from the bar towards the select rooms at the back. One of them laughed as he saw Lorna standing close to Learhy.

"Go ahead, bud. Kiss her, we won't mind."

"Go to hell," snapped Learhy, but he kept his face averted, half-buried in the girl's long hair. The long hair which hid the hands wrapped around her throat, the hands which were ready to kill if she made the slightest effort to attract attention. When the passage was clear he released her, ready to clamp a hand over her mouth if she should scream, ready for anything she might do except the thing she did.

Which was to kiss him full on the lips.

The box was five feet long, three wide and two thick, a coffin-shaped container of flimsy plaste-wood, indifferently airtight and bound with strong wire. It was supposed to contain bonded supplies. It held Learhy.

It wasn't comfortable in the box. It was impossible to sit upright, lie at full length or do anything other than crouch, knees drawn to chest, head at an angle. Movement would have helped, but movement would have caused sound and vibration, either of which could betray his existence. All Learhy could do was to curse, and cursing did no good. He had been in the box for hours. He would stay in it until he burst free or someone let him out.

The others were in a similar plight. Stanson could probably

stand it well enough; he was small and made of wire. Klien would be suffering; maybe he would faint or find some other escape. Learhy couldn't feel pity for the pudgy man. Loose talkers were dangerous, and Klien had proved himself to be a loose talker. He didn't even like thinking about him. Instead, he thought of the girl.

Strange girl, Lorna, the product of a strange upbringing. She had a different set of morals than the normal girl, the way she had kissed him, for example, after he had almost throttled her. Was it that she admired brute strength? She had hated Geeson for beating her, but it wasn't hard to hate Geeson. Idly, Learhy wondered how she was making out cooped up in her box.

Lorna. He felt again the touch of her lips against his, so soft, so warm, so unexpected. She was thin, but good food would cure that. She knew the world and understood it. She had seen her chance and grabbed at it with both hands. She had guessed the great idea and had wanted a part of it. And they had taken her because they could do nothing else—she had made that plain. If she couldn't join them, then she would ruin them; the threat had been unspoken but it was there. So now she was in a box probably cursing her fate and wishing that she was free of the whole mess.

The box tilted and Learhy forgot the girl. It heaved and swayed, the movement sending stabs of agony through his cramped muscles. He pressed his hands against the sides of the container and took advantage of the external noise to move a little. Only a little, more was impossible. Then he caught the transmitted rumble of wheels and knew that he was on his way.

Supplies from Tycho were loaded within the domes and run out to the ships on crawler-drawn trolleys. Most of the containers were airtight, or sufficiently so as to make no difference. No difference, that is, if the freight was what it was supposed to be. Canned goods and individually wrapped packages didn't suffer from a brief exposure to low air pressure. But Learhy had no individual wrapping. He heard the thin whine of escaping air and knew that he was in trouble.

The leak was small but difficult to get at. The plastawood container had cracked down one corner, the damage hardly noticeable from within and not noticeable at all from outside. It was minor as damage went, but it was enough to kill the man inside the box. Learhy, wriggling without regard to vibration, tore off his shirt, wadded it, pressed it over the crack.

The hissing continued.

He forced himself to be calm.

The leak was small and the box full of air. It should be a simple matter to determine just how long he had; simple, but who can figure out a thing like that? A mathematician, perhaps, with graph paper and slide rule, but not Learhy, not doubled up in a too-small box and hearing his life hiss away. He pressed the wadded shirt over the crack again, harder this time, but with no more success than before.

The next step was born of desperation. He dug his teeth into the base of his left thumb, biting until he tasted blood. He rubbed the open wound over the crack, smearing the area with blood. The blood was thick, the crack thin. The escaping air forced it deep into the opening, pushing it where it had to go. The expanding air cooled, freezing the blood and filling the crack even more. The hissing stopped.

Learhy, saved from asphyxiation, waited for the next step.

It came when the box was picked up and flung violently down onto something hard. The impact started the leak again, and by the time Learhy had sealed it the violent movements of the container had stopped. It had, he guessed, been transferred from the trolley to the storeroom within the ship. There it had been stacked along with others. There would be no more movement now that the loading was com-

plete. Learhy didn't find anything in that to be grateful for.

The final stacking had upended the box so that he rested on the back of his neck, the full weight of his body above him, his knees scraping the box just before his chest. To turn was impossible; all he could do was to straighten his legs a little. He could do that and wait. Wait until the ship was fully loaded, the cargo compartments sealed and pressurized, the contents checked by the crew and signed for. Wait until the passengers had come aboard, the hull sealed and the ship readied for take-off. Wait until it was safe to move, praying that one of the others would be able to escape, or that not too much weight had been piled on his box.

Wait and wonder how long a man can live suspended upside down with the blood rushing to his head, seeming to fill it like a gigantic balloon so that it swelled and swelled and surely must burst.

Wait until it did burst in a shower of scintillant, transient stars.

Learhy gained awareness with a skull which seemed to have been split wide open and a sticky wetness on his left hand. The wetness was from his own blood, surging from the self-inflicted wound. His head, when he examined it, was unbroken. It was only then he realised that he was no longer upside down.

Explanation came as he eased his legs. His box had been racked high in the compartment and because of the ship-spin was now right side up. Briefly he wondered at the lack of acceleration shock during take-off, then remembered that this was a high class ship and the take-off would have been gentle. Not that he would have known about it had it been different. The only important thing was that he was alive.

Barely alive.

His head ached and his eyes felt distended beneath their lids. His lips were cracked and his tongue swollen. He gasped, sweat streaming down his body, stinging where it hit his thumb. He knew that he had to get out of his prison and get out fast. The box was air-tight, he had seen to that, and the oxygen was almost gone.

Shoulders bunched, he strained his back against the side of the crate. It was like trying to move a mountain. He gritted his teeth, twisted so that his back was against the other side and tried again. Something seemed to yield a little. Sucking in a lungful of the foul air he tried again, jamming his knees a little higher so as to get better leverage and throwing the full strength of his thigh and back muscles against the plastawood. A wire parted with a spiteful hum, another, then he was falling from the box, his eyes seared by the dim, blue glow of a UV bulb.

He didn't move for a long time

after landing on the deck; he couldn't. The pain of returning circulation was bad enough and, coupled with a ghastly nausea, it rendered him helpless. He writhed on the smooth metal, eyes closed, waiting until his tortured muscles would gain life and obedience to his commands. Finally, he heaved himself painfully to his feet and went in search of the others.

"Learhy!" Stanson's smile was a grimace. "We made it." He heaved himself slowly from his box. "The others?"

"Klien's unconscious; Lorna, too." Learhy ran his tongue over his lips as he stared down at them. "Klien looks bad."

"He had less air than the rest of us." Stanson touched the pudgy man on the throat, feeling for the pulse. "He's alive." He crossed to the girl. "The same. Must have been the cramps knocked her out." His voice was little more than a whisper. "We need water."

Water was carried in tanks, not in the crated cargo, and access to it was impossible unless they went outside. Learhy settled for some canned peaches, ripping open the crate and smashing the cans against a stanchion. The thick, syrupy juice wasn't water, but it helped. Klien and Lorna recovered while they drank.

"Have some of this." Learhy handed the girl an opened can. "Drink slow and easy or you'll bring it all up again." He handed

one of the cans to Klien. "Slow and easy now."

"God!" Klien rested his head in his hands. "I thought I was dying. Now I wish I was dead."

"Drink some of that juice and you'll feel better."

"I need a drink," said Klien. "Lots of drinks." He gulped at the thick juice, trickles of it running over his chin. "Crazy caper," he muttered. "Why the hell did I ever get mixed up in it?"

"It's too late for that kind of talk." Stanson was burning with a feral eagerness. "We're where we wanted to be, right among the money." He gestured towards the doors of the compartment. "Out there is all we want, and it's ours for the taking. A little quick action . . ." He sucked in his breath, his eyes gleaming at the near-fruition of his great ideal. Lorna was more practical.

"What you going to do?" Her head jerked towards the doors. "Out there."

"Take over." To Stanson it was simple, he had gone over it a thousand times in imagination. "We cut down the crew and skin the passengers. Those we can't use we get rid of." He paced the floor, almost trembling with eagerness. "We're in a closed cycle, remember. The ship is a self-sufficient unit and it carries plenty of supplies. We can blast her away from the regular flight path, throw her into orbit

around the sun, maybe. Once in deep space they'll never be able to find us. We can live like kings, have everything we need. Everything." He was speaking so fast that his words seemed to blur.

"I'll settle for a drink," said Klien. "Learhy, isn't there a drink in this place somewhere?"

"Look for it." Learhy was curt. "Get drunk and I'll break your neck. I mean it." He didn't take his eyes from Stanson. Lorna voiced his question.

"How do we get the loot off the ship?"

"We don't." In the dim, blue glow, Stanson's eyes shone like polished glass. "That's the whole beauty of the idea. We don't leave the ship at all."

Stanson was crazy, there was no other way to account for it. Learhy hunched his shoulders a trifle and his scarred hands clenched. The cargo compartment was small and no place to be cooped up with a crazy man. Stanson noticed the gesture.

"You think I'm off my beam?" He shrugged. "I got you here, didn't I? I showed you the way to get among the money, right?"

"You got us here," admitted Learhy. "I've yet to see it was a good idea."

"Then you're touched, not me." Stanson appealed to the girl. "You've got sense, Lorna, you try

and show him. This ship holds everything we need, right?"

"It depends on what you mean," she said slowly. "Maybe you'd better tell us."

"We can work this two ways," said Stanson quickly. "We can step out of here, grab what we can and jet away in one of the life-shuttles. That's the stupid way. With the ship alerted we wouldn't stand a chance. They'd come after us, radio for the Patrol, be on the watch for us at every planet. We'd be lucky to stay alive."

"We could fix that," said Learhy grimly.

"Maybe, and then again maybe not. Even if we did fix it we'd still have a small ship and little loot. We'd have to land somewhere and find a fence. We'd be robbed, but we'd expect that. We might wind up with some money in a cool place where we'd be free to spend it. That's the best we can hope for."

"Sounds good to me." Klien had found himself a bottle and had regained his euphoria. "Money, no cops, plenty to drink and an easy life, what more do you want?"

"Nothing, but why go to all that trouble to get it?"

"Because it doesn't get handed to you on a plate," said Learhy dryly.

"That's just where you're wrong." Stanson gestured towards the doors. "Out there is everything we need, everything we can hope for. Money will only enable us to

buy what's already laid on. Women? The ship is full of them. Good food? Hell, look at the supplies. Liquor, fine clothes, entertainment, servants, comfort? Name it and it's yours. Not on some crummy planet but here, right next door. Why the hell should we leave it?"

It was a new concept, one Learhy hadn't thought about before, and it took time to register. Stanson was right, of course; the *Armitage* was a top-class luxury vessel catering to the rich tourists. Those tourists, the women at least, would be the most beautiful specimens to be found anywhere in the System. The appointments would equal a palace, the food unrivalled, the entertainment anything they wished.

"We can take the ship off-flight pattern," said Stanson. "We can smash the radio and cover the ports. No one need ever know what's happened. To the shipping office it will be just another mystery, the insurance companies will write it off as a dead loss and the Patrol will stop looking. We'll be left, rulers of our own little kingdom, and we'll have everything we can think of."

"Nice," said Lorna. "Real nice." She looked from one to the other. "But you've forgotten something. There are only four of us."

"Numbers don't make that much difference." Stanson was

quick to defend his great idea. "We can strike hard and strike often. We'll cut down the crew, coop up those we don't kill, starve the passengers into submission." He made an irritable gesture. "It can be done, girl, don't think it can't."

"I could argue that," she said, "but I won't. We could probably kill them all at that. But I wasn't talking about that end of it when I said we were only four. I was talking about your end."

"My end?"

"When you get your little kingdom." She looked at the men. "How many women each do you want? Five? Ten? Just a couple? One would be one too many if she has a knife and is unwilling. How many servants? How many chefs? How many men to dance attendance? Every one you spare will be a knife at your throat, remember that."

"We can watch it," said Stanson. "A couple of us will always be awake and watching."

"Watching the food being prepared? I could kill any man I had to feed if I wanted to. And how could you watch them all every moment of the time? Klien likes his bottle; a drunkard's not a good watch dog. You probably want your women; how close can a lover watch? Get wise, Stanson, you wouldn't last a week."

"Shut your mouth!" Stanson

was angry at the opposition. "It can be done if we want to do it. All right, so we cut down to a handful and scare the heart out of them. We hold hostages to make sure they play ball. We break their spirit so that they crawl, begging for the chance to serve us. Don't overestimate the tourists, girl; most of them would be glad to throw in with us if we allowed them to play their games."

And that was true. The crew wouldn't co-operate; they had their duty. The pampered passengers would; they valued their skins. And in any group there are always those eager to serve in order to gain power. Stanson's idea was crazy, but it could work. And the rewards were high, the highest they could imagine.

"You win," said Lorna. "We'll play it your way as far as we can. What now?"

"We get moving." Stanson looked at Learhy. "You still got that gun?"

"I've got it." Learhy produced the weapon, frowning as he read the charge-indicator set in the butt. "This won't help much, it's almost exhausted."

"It will have to do." Stanson hefted a can of peaches. "We can use these as missiles or clubs if we have to. The thing is to get out, cut down a few members of the crew and get into their uniforms. Then we head for the control room

and take over. From there we can operate the bulkhead doors and split up the ship. The captain will have some guns, and with them we'll have the ship by the tail." He nodded in satisfaction. "That's about it. Grab some members of the crew and make for the control room at top speed. Play it safe and easy, but don't waste time and don't be gentle."

"We're wasting time." Learhy reached for the door control wheel. He spun it in his big hands and jerked hard.

The door was locked.

The fifth-night ball was in full swing, the lower deck a glittering maze of light and colour as men and women drifted to the music of a selected band. No canned music for the luxury trade of the *Armitage*, no recordings or mass-produced orchestrations. Each piece was unique, heard once and then never heard again, for no human musicians can ever repeat themselves exactly.

Captain Maitland, attending from duty not from inclination, smiled and bowed towards scented women who differed only in degree from the harpies infesting the dives around the spaceports. Men, supercilious because they were the centre of a system designed to make them so, acknowledged the man who guarded their lives with his skill, with a curt

nod of the head. Those that did so acknowledge him at all, that is. Most did not. They couldn't be blamed for that. Maitland was, basically, an employee, and as such was entitled to nothing but the payment for his services.

He turned as his second-in-command trod deftly towards him. Pomeroy retained his half-smile and his salute was something from the book, but his voice, as he spoke quietly in the captain's ear, held a hint of strain.

"Can you get away, sir?"

"Trouble?" Maitland, ever conscious of his responsibility, was quick to ask the important question.

"I don't know, sir. Perhaps it's just something unusual. I thought you should know, sir."

"Know what?" Maitland was curt. Pomeroy, he knew, envied him his command. "Wouldn't it be a good idea to get to the point?"

"Yes, sir. I . . ." Pomeroy broke off as a woman, who was fighting a losing battle with her age, simpered up to the captain. She had a smooth-faced, too-effeminate youngster in tow. Not man enough to give the captain the respect due to his rank, he stared down his nose with an artificial hauteur which made Maitland long to kick him where it would do the most good. He resisted the impulse. Should he yield to it, dismissal from the service would

be the least part of his punishment.

"Captain!" The woman's voice held a shade less warmth than it would had she been addressing her dog. "Claude would like to visit the control room. Of course, I know all about your stupid regulations, but I hardly feel that they apply to persons like ourselves. Will you attend to it?"

"Certainly, madam." By a supreme effort of will Maitland kept the smile on his face. "Mr. Pomeroy will have the greatest pleasure in conducting the young man. Shall we say at ten tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Painted eyebrows arched. "Really, captain, you seem to be most unco-operative. I expect you to conduct Claude yourself, immediately."

Pomeroy may have envied the captain his command, but his own pride in the service drew him to the rescue. He smiled as if he found the old hag the most attractive woman on board and his voice was as warmly intimate as he dared to make it.

"Tomorrow would be best, madam," he urged. "At the moment some of the more interesting pieces of equipment are not available for inspection and usage. If you will grant me the honour of conducting your friend tomorrow I can assure you that he will have no cause for complaint."

"You are most gracious."

Pomeroy was younger than the captain and so had more interest for the woman. "I have friends, Mr. Pomeroy, and they shall hear of your understanding desire to help." Her eyes grew hard as she glanced at Maitland. "So unlike other people."

"The captain has a great responsibility," said Pomeroy smoothly. He lowered his voice as he soothed her ruffled feelings, doing his best to exonerate the captain from any intention or desire to offend. His youth rather than his words did the trick. Maitland sighed with relief as he watched the couple move away.

"Thanks, Pomeroy. What was it you wanted to see me about?"

"Two things, sir. Sparks reports an electronic storm lying ahead, and the steward reports strange sounds coming from one of the storerooms."

"The storm, is it plotted?" Maitland took the important thing first.

"Yes, sir. We should miss it by a comfortable margin."

"Good. And the noises?"

"Like knocking, or so the steward says. Permission to open the storeroom, sir?"

"Granted." Maitland hesitated. It was his duty to investigate the noises, but equally so he wanted to check up on the reported storm. The storm seemed to be the most important. "Take the steward with

you to check on the noises," he decided. "Probably some loose cargo; half those labourers at Tycho don't know how to stack a compartment. Let me know what you discover."

"Yes, sir." Pomeroy saluted and turned away. The steward was waiting for him just outside the cargo compartment. He recognised the officer and held up a hand, warning for silence.

"Hear it, sir?" He lifted his ear from where it had pressed against the metal. "Getting fainter now, but still regular. There, hear it now?" The noises had increased. Pomeroy listened to them for a moment, then nodded to the steward.

"Sounds like someone signalling to be let out. Maybe a stowaway. Open up and we'll find out."

"A stowaway!" The steward shrugged at the impossibility of the idea and spun the locking wheel. Pomeroy handed him the key and he inserted it, twisted, spun the wheel again and pulled. Pomeroy stepped forward as the door swung open, the steward crowding at his side.

Death came before they could recognize the danger.

"Two of them." Learhy stared up and down the passage, the ion gun in his hand. "Only the two of them."

"We were lucky," said Lorna

listlessly. She leaned against the rifled cargo, not looking at the dead men on the floor.

"Water!" Klien's voice was a rasp. "I've got to have water."

"We all need water." Stanson had dragged the bodies into the compartment and was busy stripping them. "Get into the steward's rig, Klien, you're about his size. I'll take the other." He glanced towards the door, his fingers fumbling with the zips. "See anything?"

"No." Learhy crouched back out of sight should anyone glance down the passage. Like the others, he looked a mess. His lips and chin were thick with stubble, his skin filthy over the UV induced tan, his hands torn and smeared with his own dried blood. His eyes were bloodshot and reflected his craving for water, a craving induced by five days of drinking nothing but syrup and alcohol. He touched his chin, felt the beard and was reminded of something.

"Get out of that rig, Stanson. With your beard you'd never pass for an officer. Give it to Lorna; at least she doesn't need a shave."

"What about her hair?" Stanson answered his own question. "She can tuck it under the cap." He began to strip, cursing the wasted time. "Here, girl, hurry!"

It was no time for false modesty. Skirt and blouse flew to one side

as Lorna donned the uniform. It was a poor fit, but, at a distance, it would pass. She looked distastefully at the blood-stained cap, then pulled it on her head, tucking up her hair.

"How do I look?"

"Fair enough." Learhy examined her with one quick glance. "Bad, but you could be worse."

"Thanks for nothing." She stepped towards the door. "What do I do?"

"Case the passage." Learhy handed her the gun. "Look for a cubicle with a faucet. If anyone's inside let them have it. Klien will cover you as best as he can." He gave the pudgy man a can of peaches. "Don't worry about smashing them; these cans are stronger than they look." He glanced down towards the two men on the floor. Both had died from crushed skulls. "Get moving!"

Lorna was lucky. The third room she examined was a steward's cabin and contained toilet articles as well as a wash basin. Learhy found a jar of depilatory cream, smeared the goopy stuff over his face and waited impatiently for it to dissolve his beard. Klien had run to the tap and was gulping water. Stanson, more nervous than ever, stood guard at the door.

"We should have locked the storeroom," he said. "We should have locked it after us."

"We'll be needing it to dispose of the rest." Learhy snatched a handful of tissues from a dispenser and wiped the cream and displaced hairs from his face. He tossed the wad of tissue into the chute, pulled Klien away from the faucet and let the stream of water run into his mouth. He felt as if he could drink for ever. He wanted to soak in water, gulp it until his stomach distended like a balloon, replenish every dehydrated tissue at once. He knew better than to try.

Klien lunged forward as Learhy rose from the tap to be short-armed away. Learhy found a beaker, rinsed it, filled it and handed it to the girl.

"Drink slow and easy," he warned. "Gulp it too fast and you'll get stomach cramps." He pushed Klien towards the door. "Get a drink, Stanson, while Klien watches."

"We should be moving," said Stanson. "We can't afford to waste time."

"We're not wasting time." Learhy jerked open the wardrobe and found a couple of uniforms. "We've got to clean up and get fit, and this is as good a place to do it as any." He waited until Stanson had taken his drink and then laved his hands and arms. Clean, he donned one of the uniforms and tossed the other to Stanson. In the pockets of his own clothes he found a package of cigarettes, lit one and inhaled with satisfaction.

Klien, standing by the door, stared worriedly over his shoulder.

"Someone's coming."

"Freeze!" The cabin went dark as Learhy hit the switch. He pulled Klien away from the door and crouched by the panel, the gun in his hand. Footsteps echoed from down the passage, seemed to hesitate outside the cabin and then began to fade. Learhy took a chance, cracked the door and peered after the sound. He switched on the lights as he shut the door.

"Two men, engineers by the look of them, probably going off-shift or catching some chow." He rubbed his forehead, annoyed to find that he was sweating. "Get washed, Klien."

"But . . ."

"Get washed!" Learhy leaned back against the door as the pudgy man hurried to obey. "When we leave here we'd better go out with a plan," he said. "Any ideas, Stanson?"

"I've told you my ideas." Stanson, now that he had removed his stubble and washed himself, looked a little less desperate than before. "We head for the control room, fast!"

"Lorna?"

"I'm a passenger." She hesitated. "Could we go easy on the killing? Those two poor guys . . ."

"It was them or us." Learhy had no time for sentiment or squeamishness. "We haven't got much

time," he reminded. "That officer was sent to investigate our knocking. When he doesn't report back someone will come after him to see why. We daren't risk the chance of a general alarm, not if we want to stay alive we can't." He hefted the almost exhausted ion gun. "Ready?"

"Ready for what?" Klien blinked reddened eyes.

"To do what we came for." Learhy straightened and drew a deep breath. "Let's go." He snapped off the light and opened the door of the cabin.

Captain Maitland was worried. Worry, to him, was no stranger, but this time the keening anxiety was a little more pronounced than usual. The cause, as he knew, was the report of the electronic storm received by the radio operator in a message relayed from the observation satellites scattered throughout space. Knowing the cause didn't obviate the anxiety. If he had been in command of a freighter things would have been easier, but he was in command of a top-class luxury ship with a cargo of passengers who had to be treated with superhuman tact and diplomacy.

"Request a repeat-check on the movement of the storm," he ordered. "Top priority."

"Yes, sir." The man concentrated on his instruments. "We won't foul it, sir." Lambert, the

cheerful, cocky navigator, looked up from his computer. "If the satellites are to be trusted we'll clear it by close on a million miles."

"Too close." Maitland was uncomfortably aware of the margin of error in any reported storms. He crossed to the flight chart, a glittering panel of coloured lights traced by a sharp green line. A second line in red reached alongside the green. The green line was their computed flight path, the red their actual course. Lambert had adjusted the panel to show the reported storm, and it sprawled, an untidy mass of black, almost touching the red line. Maitland rested his finger on the chart.

"How soon will we know?"

"Quite a while yet." Lambert had served under Maitland too long to pay lip-service to discipline. He was loyal, efficient and probably the only real friend Maitland had. He joined the captain before the panel. "We could increase speed and make sure of it, sir. The storm is drifting into our line of flight. If we keep to schedule, and if the satellites are to be trusted, we'll miss it. If not . . ." His shrug was eloquent.

"We hit it and drift until we move out of the affected area." Maitland had been in an electronic storm before. "How do you think our passengers will relish the experience?"

"They might find it amusing," said Lambert dubiously. "It will be

a new experience for them and give them something to boast about." He caught Maitland's expression. "Well, perhaps not."

"They'll scream to high heaven about inefficiency, maladministration and all the rest of it. The company will agree with them." Maitland didn't have to explain what would happen then. He would be the scapegoat all down the line. He came to a decision. "We'll accelerate a little. If we do it carefully, say at one-tenth G, they may never notice. We can alter course, too, just enough to swing us clear of the affected area." He glanced around the control room. "Pomeroy?"

"Not returned, sir." Lambert had seated himself at the computer, his fingers dancing over the keys as he set up the problem of course-speed alteration for the electronic brain to give the firing pattern. "He's at the ball, I think."

"He was." Maitland remembered the incident. "A steward reported some noises from a cargo compartment and I sent him to investigate." He frowned at his wrist watch. "He should have returned by now. Manners!"

"Sir!" A crewman stepped forward."

"Go and find Mr. Pomeroy. You'll find him down in the cargo compartments. He is to report to me immediately."

"Yes, sir." Manners saluted and

turned away. He wasn't sorry to leave the control room, not when the Old Man was in his present mood, and especially not during the fifth-night ball. He took the long way towards the cargo sector, lingering within range of the music and half-envying the sweating stewards rushing to serve the passengers. They sometimes had to eat dirt, sure, but at least they tasted second-hand luxury, and the tips were good.

Knowledge of Maitland's temper sent him on his way and he walked down the passage between the cargo compartments, looking for an open door or signs of the officer. He halted, frowning at the sight of a key thrust within a lock. Keys were retained by the officers. Pomeroy must have used his to open the door. Logic dictated that he must be inside the room. Manners pushed open the heavy metal door.

Sight of the unexpected can sometimes be as great a shock as actual physical violence. Manners had expected to see the familiar sight of racked cargo containers, with perhaps the officer inspecting them. He hadn't expected to see huddled shapes lying on the floor in a puddle of their own blood, and it took a moment for the fact to register. When it did, it was too late.

"Don't move!" The ion gun in Learhy's hand dug into Manners' side. "Just relax and you won't



THERE'S ONLY ONE WINNER

get hurt." He thrust the man forward into the room.

"Learhy!" Stanson followed them into the blue-lit darkness. "Don't waste time."

"I'm not wasting time." Learhy didn't take his eyes from the crewman. "We've got to know what we're doing, Stanson. Running around like a bunch of wild animals will get us nowhere. We can't knock off all the crew and all the passengers, not with just the four of us and an almost empty gun. This character can tell us what we have to know."

"You . . . ?" Manners couldn't believe what he'd heard. "You . . . ?"

"We'll ask the questions." The gun dug deeper into soft flesh. "Play ball and you won't get hurt, try to act smart and I'll cut you down." He eased his weight on the weapon. "Who sent you here?"

"The captain."

"He expects you back?"

"Yes, but..." Manners winced as the gun dug savagely into his side.

"No questions," said Learhy mildly. "Remember?" He frowned in deep concentration. Stanson's plan had failed almost from the start. Without the knowledge of how the ship was laid out, each step they took was a step into potential danger. Already only sheer speed had saved them from discovery, speed and a savage ruthlessness which had sickened Lorna with its brutality. Bumping

into Manners had been sheer luck. Learhy decided to ride it to the limit.

"You're going to guide us to the control room," he told Manners. "You're going to show us the way, the safe way, and you're going to act easy and natural and not give the alarm. You do that and you won't get hurt. Understand?"

Manners understood. He had a choice; he could play the hero and die or he could act the coward and live. He wasn't strong enough or intelligent enough to realise that, no matter what he did, his personal end would be the same.

It was an uneasy journey. The *Armitage* catered to the luxury trade and so carried a large crew. Normally, they would have been challenged long before they reached the control room; the safeguards to prevent unauthorized intrusion by the passengers would have taken care of that, but things were not normal.

It was the time of the fifth-night ball, the stewards were working double shifts, and what officers could be spared from watch-duty were dancing attendance on the passengers. And Manners was scared. He could have guided them into trouble; instead, he did just what they wanted.

"We're going to get away with it." Stanson wet his lips as he whispered to Learhy. "You hear

that? We're going to get away with it."

Learhy didn't bother to answer. He kept close to Manners, the ion gun pressed into his side, the muzzle close to the spine. In such a position and at such a range the charge would be lethal. Klien, waddling close so as to give cover, wished that he could have a drink. He had been too long without and felt black depression rising about him. Lorna, trying to walk and act like a man, found time to wonder just how it would all end. Stanson had no doubts.

"Fast and hard," he whispered. "Hit them before they know what's happening. Hear that, you others? Fast and hard?"

"Shut up!" Learhy spoke from the corner of his mouth. "Get ready to act, not talk."

An officer emerged from the control room, looked surprised as he saw the group, then relaxed as he recognized Manners.

"Did you find Pomeroy?" He jerked his head towards the control room. "The Old Man's jumping. I . . ."

Klien acted with the fury of desperation. He lunged forward, the can of peaches in his hand swinging towards the officer's skull. There was a dull, soggy sound as the officer crumpled and Klien stared foolishly at the fruit and syrup smearing his hand and arm.

"It broke," he said wonderingly. "It broke all to hell."

Learhy wasn't listening. Even as the pudgy man had acted he had struck once, viciously, at the base of Manners' neck, a hard, killing blow. Even as the officer fell he sprang forward into the control room, the others piling at his heels. Stanson closed and dogged fast the door and by the time Maitland had turned the room was sealed.

"Freeze!" Learhy gestured with his weapon. "Move and you collect."

"What is this?" Maitland, like Manners had been earlier, was numbed by the shock of the unexpected. Lambert was quicker to accept reality.

He rose from his seat at the computer, his hand snatching at a heavy slide rule, his arm swinging back for the throw. Learhy caught the motion and swung, firing at the same time. Lambert doubled, writhing grotesquely on the floor as his muscles jerked to the electrical stimulus. The radio operator joined him as Learhy fired again, the stench of ozone filling the control room. Two other officers went down as Klien and Stanson flung themselves into the attack. Alone, Maitland faced the threat of the ion gun in Learhy's hand. It was exhausted but he couldn't know that.

"Mutiny!" Maitland glanced down towards Lambert. "Murdering mutineers! You . . ."

"Save it!" Learhy was curt. "He'll recover if that's what is worrying you. And we're no mutineers." He stared about the control room. "Where are the guns?"

"What do you want?"

"The arms locker; where is it?" Learhy stepped forward as Maitland remained silent. "Talk, damn you! Talk!"

Maitland wasn't a coward, but he was human, and as such, could experience fear. He experienced it when looking at Learhy. The man didn't need to utter threats; he radiated an aura of desperation. He was a killer, they were all killers, and they would slaughter without compunction. Against such people there was no immediate defence. And Maitland had more than himself to consider.

"There." He pointed to a small panel set flush in the wall. "You'll need a key."

Stanson took the key and opened the panel. Inside rested a half dozen pistols, ion guns, naturally; missile weapons were as suicidal in a spaceship as in a dome colony. The guns were new and fully charged, relics of the time when space madness was a real threat and only violence could quell physical danger. Armed, some of the tension left Stanson and he began to take command.

"All right," he said to Maitland.

"This is what you do. First you seal the ship and then you order most of the crew into one of the sectors. Then . . ."

"Slow down." Learhy checked a pair of ion guns, gave them to Lorna and took the remaining weapon for himself. "One thing at a time," he said. "We seal the sectors, yes, then we talk about what happens afterwards." He looked at Maitland. "Show us."

Maitland hesitated, then led the way towards a panel set with signal lamps and ranked buttons. There was a master button and light at the top of the board. For a moment he toyed with the idea of trying to fool these strangers, then had better sense. Later, perhaps, when their caution had waned from fatigue or overconfidence, but not now. And he didn't know but that one of them might be an ex-spaceman with complete knowledge of the workings of a spaceship. Not that much knowledge was necessary. The panel and instruments were clearly marked.

Stanson looked at the panel, ideas running through his mind. Things had happened fast, almost too fast, and were passing his previously conceived plans. From now on he would have to improvise. But, as yet, his original scheme could still be worked.

He reached out and pressed the master button.

Lights flared on the panel,

winking red one by one and flashing to green as the bulkhead doors slid across passages and corridors. Designed to prevent air loss in case of a ruptured hull or to seal off part of the vessel in emergencies, the doors were both manually and remotely controlled. They would close if the air pressure fell below a set limit. They could only be opened if the master panel allowed it, or if the electronic controls were by-passed.

Stanson didn't bother to worry about why they had been installed or how they operated. All he knew was that he had sealed passengers and crew into small, isolated groups. The *Armitage* was now, in effect, a prison, with himself as the warden.

And it would stay a prison just as long as he wished.

Nothing succeeds like success, and it is a truism that luck comes to the lucky. Lorna should have felt on top of the world. Instead, she was haunted by a growing doubt.

"I don't like it," she said to Learhy. "I don't like it at all."

"Conscience bothering you?" He didn't ask what it was that she didn't like; he shared her feeling. It was his criminal instinct, perhaps, but he felt that he was sitting on top of an atomic pile with all the dampers pulled out.

She considered his question.

"Maybe. We've gone in pretty deep, haven't we, Learhy?"

"As far as we can go," he admitted. "They'll have to dream up something special in the way of punishment if they catch us." He caught her expression. "Is that what you're worried about?"

"No," she said, and he believed her. "I knew what I was letting myself in for when I joined you. It isn't that, Learhy, it's . . . it's all this." Her gesture went beyond the control room in which they sat and included the entire vessel. "It's big, Learhy. It's too big. It scares me." She wasn't alone in that.

It scared Learhy, too, though he wouldn't admit it, even to himself, and it scared Klien to the point of terror. They had managed to catch a tiger and were holding it fast by the tail—and now they didn't know what to do with it. Stanson's great idea wasn't working as it should. Instead of being kings in their own private little kingdom, they were jailers over a bunch of men and women who were rapidly getting out of control. And, short of mass slaughter, there was nothing they could do about it.

"Stanson scares me," said Lorna. "I was with him when we stripped the cabins. There was one old woman still in her bunk . . ." She swallowed. "You know what I mean?"

"You're getting soft." Learhy had no time for weakness. "It

takes guts to get what you want in this world."

"Maybe I haven't got that kind of guts." She hesitated. "Learhy."

"What is it?"

"Do you believe in insurance?"

"I'm not good at games, girl. If you want to say something, then say it."

"There's a life-shuttle connected to the control room." She pointed towards a hatch. "Down there past a door. You know what I was thinking? I was thinking that maybe it would be a good idea to load it with some of the loot, then, if we have to run for it, we'll have something to show for our trouble."

"Our trouble?"

"Yours and mine. All of us, what does it matter?" Her fingers closed on his arm and her breath was warm on his face. "All right, let's face it. I'm thinking of you and me and to hell with the others. Why should we worry about them anyway? Klien's a drunk and Stanson's crazy. Unless we look after ourselves we'll all be caught." She pressed herself hard against him. "Well, Learhy?"

She didn't see his face and so couldn't read his expression. He wasn't shocked at her proposal, but he didn't like it, either. Learhy had few ethics and no moral compunctions, but he had learned the hard way that the only way to survive is to unite. Once let their partnership be broken and they

would all wind up as compulsory subjects for vivisection without the benefit of anæsthetics. The time for self-seeking and double-crossing might come later, but not now, and not while they each needed the other.

"Well, Learhy?" she said again. "Is it a deal?"

"Maybe." He pretended to think about it. "Tell you what. You load the life-shuttle with the pick of the loot and make sure that there is plenty of food, air and water."

"Then it's a deal?"

He smiled into her face. "Sure, why not? But there's no need to rush things. We've got the chance of a lifetime here to make our pile, and we don't want to leave anything behind. You do as I say and wait for the word."

"And Stanson?"

"I'll worry about Stanson." He rose as the ship phone buzzed. "That must be him now. I'll handle it."

Stanson was irritable at being kept waiting. Klien, smiling foolishly, was at his side. They entered the control room and Learhy dogged fast the door behind them. Stanson glowered at the heaped boxes on the smooth floor.

"What's all this junk doing in here?"

"I like it," said Lorna. She was defiant. "Money, jewels, fine

clothes, what more could a girl want?"

"I could tell you," hinted Klien. He winked and burped. "If I was younger, I could show you, too."

"Save it for later." Learhy didn't look at the pudgy man. "Well, Stanson, any more brilliant ideas?"

"We took the ship, didn't we?" Stanson fumbled a cigarette into his mouth, puffed it to life and almost immediately threw it aside. "Maybe it's your turn to do some thinking."

"I've done it." Learhy helped himself to a drink from the bottle in Klien's pocket. "So far we've taken over the ship, locked the officers in a cabin, sealed off the engineers and other crew in various sections of the vessel and cooped all the passengers up in the lower deck. We've also stripped the cabins of everything of portable value, cracked open the Purser's safe and smashed the radio. Now what?"

"Hostages," said Stanson.

"More loot," said Klien. He tilted his bottle. "They were having themselves a ball when we took over," he explained. "The passengers must be loaded with portables in the way of gems and wallets. What say we collect?"

"Hostages," said Stanson again. He ignored the pudgy man. "We threaten to cut down say, twenty passengers unless the officers play

the way we say. If they don't agree, then we double the original figure."

"And when we run out of passengers?" Learhy was ironic.

"We won't." Stanson knew what he was talking about. "Those monkeys believe in a thing called duty. Their first duty is to the welfare of the passengers. They won't argue when we tell them what we want done and what we'll do unless it is done."

"Why don't we just cut and run for it?" said Learhy suddenly. "We can take what we've got and live easy on the Asteroids."

"No." Stanson was determined. "We'll play it my way." He bared his teeth in sudden anger. "Those monkeys will jump when I give the word or they'll suffer. They'll fall in line when they see we mean business."

Learhy didn't comment, he wasn't so sure.

The cabin was small, stuffy, filled with foul air and the effects of too many men compressed in too small a space. Maitland, his uniform creased and rumpled, sat in one corner, his back against the wall. Around him the other officers sat or lounged as best as they could. The only light came from a UV store-bulb. There was no water.

"How long?" Lambert had recovered from the effects of the

ion bolt and, aside from an unusual pallor, showed no apparent ill effects. Others were not so fortunate.

"How long what?" Maitland guessed that the navigator was trying to make conversation. "How long can we live without fresh water or fresh air? How long we've been cooped up in here? How long those pirates can hold the ship? What do you mean?"

"Take your pick," said Lambert. "How did they get on board in the first place?"

"Hidden in the stores." Maitland glowered at the dim bulb. "But that isn't important. What is important is that they have the whip hand." He gave a sound between a snort and a laugh. "Four people, one of them a woman, and they get away with a thing like this. Pomeroy dead, Manners, a dozen others. Who would believe it possible?"

"It's happening." Lambert winced as he moved, his muscles still sore from the effects of the ion bolt. "The question is, what happens next?"

"We'll win in the end," said Maitland. "We have to win. They need us to service the ship, tend to the air and engines. Once we get out of this cage . . ." His voice trailed away in visions of beautiful vengeance. Not that it would do him any personal good. As the captain he was responsible for

what happened on and to his ship, and he was effectively ruined. No Board of Inquiry would accept the excuses he had to offer, and they would be right. But that was small consolation.

Time passed and the air grew thicker, their thirst more demanding. None of them had a watch. Stanson had seen to that. Both he and Learhy knew from experience the uses to which the most innocent mechanisms could be put by determined prisoners, and had taken no chances. They hadn't stopped to think, or hadn't bothered to worry about the effects of stale air and no water on wounded men. Maitland was glad when the noisiest of them, a man with a splintered skull, lapsed into unconsciousness. His moans had been affecting them all.

"Someone's coming." Lambert, resting with his back against the door, had felt the vibration of the turning wheel. "Do we rush them?"

The door swung open before the captain could answer, and brilliant light streamed into the cabin. Stanson, a gun in each hand, gestured for Maitland to step outside.

"Only the captain," he warned. "The rest of you try anything and I'll stop his clock."

"What do you want?" Maitland blinked in the bright lights of the passage. Learhy, as alert and cautious as ever, stood behind and

to one side of Stanson. Lorna, together with Klien, stood well out of range of any possible rush. Lambert's suggestion would have proved futile.

"We've come to make a deal," said Stanson. "You agree to operate the ship and do as we say and no one gets hurt."

"And the alternative?"

"Twenty passengers get shoved out of the air-lock." Stanson moved closer and lowered his voice. "Play it smart, captain, what have you to lose? Ride along with us and we'll cut you in for an equal share. Go against us and you'll be responsible for the deaths of your passengers." He stepped back. "The choice is yours."

It was, as he knew, no choice at all. Maitland had to think of the welfare of both passengers and crew, as well as his ship. If he had to agree to help Stanson in order to do that, then he had to agree. Not for one moment did he delude himself into thinking that Stanson was trying a bluff; the man had gone too far for that.

"I'll need my officers," said Maitland. "I can't run the ship without them."

"Then you agree?" Stanson was jubilant, Learhy was not. He knew that Maitland was only waiting for an opportunity to strike back.

"How many officers?" said Learhy.

"At least a third. My navigator, radio operator, chief engineer..."

"You can have your third." Stanson was impatient. "The rest we keep as hostages. Try anything and they get theirs together with the passengers." He gestured towards the cabin. "Call out those you need."

"Learhy." Lorna had moved closer while Stanson had talked to Maitland. "This is wrong, Learhy, you know that. Once let them birds out of their cage and we're in trouble. Stanson trusts them, I don't." She kept her voice low. "That insurance I spoke about; it's fixed and ready."

Learhy nodded, feeling the old, familiar tension in his stomach. Something was wrong and he didn't know what. His instincts screamed incipient danger at the same time that his logic told him that there could be no danger at all. They were armed, the officers were not. They were in favourable positions while the officers were blinking in the relatively harsh glare of the passage lights. If they tried anything they could be cut down under a hail of ion bolts.

He was still worrying about it when the lights went out.

There was a split-second of silence and immobility, then a furious rush of bodies. Learhy jumped away from where he'd been standing, jerking the trigger

of the ion gun, which refused to fire. Something banged into him and a heavy object smashed across his nose. Maddened with pain and rage, he struck out with the pistol, feeling the jar of the blow run up his arm. In the darkness, Stanson was cursing with a frenzied violence.

"Kill them! Cut them down! Don't let them get away!"

"Shut up, you fool!" Learhy kicked and elbowed at someone who clawed at him. "Klien! Lorna! To me!"

If they heard him they didn't answer. Blinded by the sudden dark, they were in a worse state than the officers who had come rushing from the cabin. Grunts and cursing interspersed with blows and the echoes of racing feet echoed from the walls of the passage. Then harsh brilliance was all about them as the lights flashed into life.

"Learhy! Klien!" Stanson spun, his guns eager for targets. "What happened?"

"Someone gimmicked the lights." Learhy wiped blood from his face. "They get away?"

"Gimmicked the lights? How?" Stanson was baffled.

It was a stupid question and Learhy didn't waste time answering it. He dropped to his knees beside the slender figure half covered by the bulk of a man. The man was breathing with difficulty, Lorna wasn't breathing at all.

"Lorna!" Stanson stared down at her. "Hurt?"

"Dead." Learhy touched the thick hair, matted now with blood, remembering his own, violent blow. His fault? One of the officers? Stanson perhaps, or Klien? Not that it mattered; in the dark anything could have happened. She was dead and this was no time for mourning.

"Learhy!" Klien heaved himself to his feet, holding the pit of his stomach. He was ashen pale and had lost his gun. "Someone kicked me." He saw Lorna. "Dead?"

"They took their chance," said Learhy. He glanced at the lights, burning steadily as if nothing had happened. "Now they've got away. Let's get out of here."

He led the way to the control room, knowing that it was too late. He skidded to a halt as the blue finger of an ion gun reached towards him, ducking just in time. Desperately, he raced away from the control room, the others at his heels.

"The passengers!" Stanson was clutching at straws. "We've still got a chance."

"No chance at all." Learhy paused before a panel, his fingers tearing at the fastenings. "Maitland's back in control. He'll open the doors and release the passengers and crew. We could get some of them, but not all." The

panel swung open. "This leads to the life-shuttle, a second route to the one from the control room. If we move fast we may make it."

Stanson took the lead, running down the narrow passage at top speed, his eyes glaring like those of a trapped animal. Learhy came next, followed by Klien. The pudgy man was hurt. Whoever had kicked him had known their business, and he sweated with agony as he tried to keep up with the others. Even Learhy's warning couldn't spur him on.

"Maitland may pull the same trick we did. If he shuts the doors before we reach the shuttle we're sunk."

"Can he do that?" Stanson kept his eyes ahead and alert for danger.

"He can." Learhy didn't bother to explain how he'd examined the life-shuttle installation in company with Lorna. "And if he's as clever as I think he is, he will. He knows this ship better than we do, remember."

Klien groaned as the others drew away. His legs felt like lead and the pain from his groin was worse than anything he'd ever imagined possible. He wanted to drop, to curl into a ball, to hide himself away from the world with his misery. Instead, he forced his legs to carry him closer and closer to safety. He was almost up to Learhy when it happened.

"The door!" Stanson screamed the warning. "He's beaten us to it!"

Just ahead of them a thick door was falling from the ceiling. It didn't drop as it would have done under emergency operation, but it was wasting no time. Stanson wasted none, either. He flung himself forward and down, literally diving under the panel. Learhy did the same, feeling cold terror as he clawed his way to safety. Klien wasn't so lucky.

He screamed as he felt the lower edge of the panel bite into the small of his back. He kept screaming as it dug deeper. Stanson paid no attention; he was too busy ripping open the life-shuttle. Learhy hesitated, saw that there was nothing he could do, and followed Stanson into the tiny ship. The door had no emotions, either, it just kept closing.

"Close!" Stanson wiped sweat from his face. "How do we operate this thing?" His hands were moving even as he spoke, pressing the priming buttons, tripping the release, twitching as they waited for the external plates to move out of the way. Learhy, having sealed them in, took the co-pilot's chair.

"Can Maitland stop us now?" Stanson was a bundle of nerves. "Damn monkey! Gimmicking the lights the way he did. We . . ." He grunted as stars suddenly shone on the viewplate. "Here we go!"

Like a flung stone, the tiny shuttle darted from the flank of the

Armitage, the release gear sending a rapidly dissipating cloud of vapour after them. Safely clear, the rockets flared into life, thrusting the little vessel into the immensity of space.

Thrusting it directly towards the heart of the electronic storm.

Stanson spun the ship, building up the centrifugal force to simulate just under a half-Earth gravity. That done, he concentrated on where they should go.

"Mars?" He turned and looked at Learhy. "Shall we make for Mars?"

"The *Armitage* will be there before us." Learhy stared at the dwindling image of the ship on the afterplate. "They're on the economical orbit, and we haven't the fuel to try any tricks." He frowned at the after-image, then concentrated on the foreplate, brilliant with its array of stars. The coleostat compensated for the ship-spin and the clarified electronic picture showed a host of glittering points.

"The Asteroids, then?" Stanson was undecided. "You figure we could get that far?"

It was talking for the sake of making noise, and both knew it. In space a ship kept moving until something stopped it, and the only limiting factors to any journey were food, water, air and time. They had plenty of time.

"How about Ceres?" said Stanson. "I've heard tales about Ceres. Or maybe we should try to make Zelgan. You fancy Zelgan, Learhy?"

"One or the other." Learhy wasn't interested. Stanson glared his impatience.

"We're in this together," he reminded. "It's your neck, too, don't forget. Snap out of it and take an interest. What shall we do?"

"Head for the Belt." Learhy stared coldly at his companion. "Neither of us is a navigator and couldn't hit where we wanted, anyway. Just concentrate on reaching the Asteroids and we'll take it from there." He snorted as Stanson jabbed ineffectually at the controls. "Use your head, man. Take a sight on the *Armitage* and head in the direction they are going. We busted their radio so they can't send word ahead, and once we cut our jets they won't be able to spot us, either." He returned his attention to the screen.

Stanson muttered to himself as he took the sight and spun the gyros to align the vessel. He was no pilot and, though every instrument was clearly marked for amateur operation, he felt out of his element and unsure of himself. Savagely, he jabbed his thumb against the firing button. Learhy, silent in his chair, took no notice of Stanson's bad temper.

He was thinking and felt depressed. Behind them the *Armitage*

dwindled out of sight, lost among the glittering stars. Before him the universe seemed empty of familiar life. It was probably the reaction from strain, the letting down of tension, he didn't know, or care. All he could think of was a girl lying silent with blood-matted hair and a man who had screamed beneath the thrust of a closing door. Neither memory was pleasant.

Stanson had left the control chair and was prowling about the cabin. He halted by the side of a heap of boxes, tugging at the lid of the topmost. He cursed as he saw what was inside.

"Loot! The stuff we took from the ship. Learhy, you know about this?"

"Lorna stacked it." Learhy didn't look from the screen.

"Lorna!" Stanson said something vile. "So she was getting ready to run out on us, was she? That . . ."

"It was insurance." Learhy quelled a rising anger. "She guessed that things might get out of hand and didn't want to leave everything behind. I knew about it."

"I didn't." Stanson slammed the lid of the box. "I should have been told." He chuckled at a sudden thought. "Not that I'm arguing, not as things turned out. There's more than enough here to set us both up for life. Both of us, Learhy, you hear that?"

"Sure." Somehow Learhy couldn't thrill to the thought of the wealth they carried with them. Later, perhaps, but not now. Stanson felt differently about it. He couldn't stop talking about what they carried, what they would do when they cashed in, how he would live, the tricks he would pull. Like Learhy, he was suffering from reaction, but his reaction took a different form. Failure had been turned into success and it went to his head like wine.

Learhy heard the voice without hearing the words. He sat and stared at the viewplate, feeling nothing, wanting nothing, at rest for one of the few times in his entire life. His vision blurred a little from fatigue and the stars wore tiny haloes, shimmering rings caused by tiredness. Pretty little rings, so small, so delicate, so . . .

The stars went out. The signal lamps on the instrument panel died. The drone of the rockets died. The cabin lights died. Everything in or about the ship died save its momentum.

And the two men who sat in sudden darkness.

It was total, that darkness, as if the very sight had left their eyes and, for the moment, that is what Learhy feared. Then he heard Stanson fumbling towards the

panel, his hands scrabbling over switches and buttons. "Dead." Stanson tried again, the switches making dry clicking sounds. "Everything's dead. I don't understand it." He stood helpless and a little afraid in the thick, cloying darkness.

"I do." Learhy had a sudden memory. "Remember when the lights went out back in the ship? The time the officers rushed us and the ion guns wouldn't work? At the time I thought that someone had gimmicked the lights, but I was wrong. They couldn't have gimmicked the guns, too, and they worked before and after the light failure."

"So?"

"So it was something outside the ship which caused it, not something inside. The only thing it could be is a storm. We must have just brushed it in the *Armitage*, but when we took off in the shuttle we headed straight towards it." Learhy gave a dry laugh. "Think of it, Stanson. Of all the directions we could have taken, we had to take the wrong one. Funny, isn't it?"

It wasn't, and they both knew it. Space was a vacuum only in the material sense. Great areas of electromagnetic disturbance drifted between the planets and within such an area every man-made electronic device ceased to function. The crew of any ship caught in a storm could only sit

and wait and hope they coasted clear before their supplies ran out.

"Light," said Stanson. "We've got to have light." His breathing sounded harsh and strained as he fumbled at the useless controls. Learhy remained calm. He found a cigarette, puffed it to life and held it towards Stanson while he lit another.

"Take this," he ordered. "Keep it in your mouth. That way we'll both know where the other is."

"You think we can see by the light of a couple of cigarettes?" Stanson was irritable. "Hell, they just give a glow. What we need is something to burn."

"These are better than nothing." Learhy puffed his cigarette to brighter life, the ruby tip throwing his face into harsh relief. He had grown up in an age of self-igniting cigarettes and so didn't miss the inevitable means of making fire an earlier smoke would have carried as a matter of course. "There should be a survival kit in here, somewhere. Let's find it."

They found it after an eternity of groping in darkness, aggravated rather than relieved by the twin spots of red from their cigarettes. It contained some assorted junk, electronic for the most part and so useless. It also contained a sealed box of archaic matches and three candles, testimony of the failure of science when confronted with the fury of an electronic storm.

Fire spurted as Stanson struck a match and a halo of light grew around the wick of a candle. Carefully, he stood it on the instrument panel, cursing as it toppled over extinguishing the flame. He relit it, and learning from experience, fastened it with a blob of wax.

"That's better." Light restored courage and banished the bogies of the dark. "Much better." Stanson rubbed his hands, pleased with his success. "Any chow in this crate?"

They ate from cans, gulping hot, sweet coffee and steaming, savoury stew from containers heated by built-in chemical units, then relaxed, smoking in the soft light of the candle. It was a machine-made candle, neat and precision-hard. It burned with a steady, unwavering glow, the light dancing from the blank metal of the cabin, the blank expanse of the viewplates. The light, the food, the relaxation made them drowsy and they dosed a little. The candle burned out in a guttering flame amid a pool of wax, flaring a little before it died.

Stanson lit the second candle.

"How long?" he said when he returned to his seat. "How long before we coast out of the storm?"

"Depends on how big it is," said Learhy. "The direction it's drifting, a lot of things."

"I know, but how long do you figure?" In the candle light Stanson's eyes looked furtive. "Days? Weeks?"

"Worried?" Learhy blew smoke towards the candle and crushed out the butt of his cigarette. "I can't answer that. All we can do is wait."

So they waited while the second candle burned into the past. Learhy must have slept a little, a tormented sleep filled with distorted visions of a dark-haired girl and a screaming man. Once he jerked into awareness to find Stanson lighting the third candle. He awoke again when it was almost gone, to find Stanson stooped over him, a peculiar expression on his face.

"Trouble?" Learhy was instantly alert. The pounding of his heart and the taste in his mouth gave the answer. "Air bad?"

"This crate's on a closed-cycle system," said Stanson bitterly. "While the machines work it's just fine, but when they don't . . ." His gesture was expressive. The shuttle worked on re-using the stale air, cleaning, filtering and re-oxygenating it by forced draught through sealed tanks of algæ. As a system it was foolproof and almost everlasting—while there was electric power to keep it operating.

Learhy sat upright, adjusting his personal equations. Nothing had really altered; there was nothing either of them could do but wait until they had passed out of the area of the storm, but the fouling of the air added a time limit. They would pass out of the storm

eventually, but they might both be dead when it happened.

But there was nothing they could do but wait.

The third and last candle died and darkness closed around them. In the darkness Learhy heard Stanson fumbling at crates and boxes, then a match flared to reveal him holding a can.

"Wrong one!" He cursed, threw it down, grabbed another. "Got it!" He tossed the matches towards Learhy. "Give me a light to work by."

"What are you doing?" Learhy was curious. He lit a succession of matches as Stanson tore open the can and freed the mass of thick, greasy paste it contained.

"Making a candle." Stanson glared around the cabin. "We need a wick, something absorbent to soak up the grease." Medicines and drugs spilled from the medicine cabinet as he ripped it open and foraged inside. He ripped open a packet of gauze, twisted it into a thick strand and began to shape the vitapaste around it. The can had been a seven-pound container, it made a big candle.

"This should do it." Stanson set it upright on the remains of the machine-made products and lit the shapeless wick. It spluttered, smouldered and went out. He tried again, using the heat of the last match to melt a little pool of grease at the base of the wick.

This time it burned, badly, unsteadily, but it burned.

"That'll do it." Stanson stepped back, well away from the candle. "It'll last as long as the air does, if no one blows it out." He ran his tongue over his lips. "Any idea how long, Learhy?"

"Until we clear the storm?" Learhy shrugged. "No."

"It might be days," said Stanson. "Or it might be hours. It might be just after the air gives out and we're both dead." He lifted his hand as if to scratch the back of his neck. "Or . . ."

With any other man it would have worked, but not with Learhy. He could add and divide as well as Stanson, and he was just as amoral. How long the air would last he didn't know, but one thing was sure—it would last one man just twice as long as it would last two.

And he had seen other cons who carried a knife tucked behind their collar.

Even at that it was close. Steel burned his side as he twisted from its path and his hands, hard and strong, almost failed him as he grabbed for knife-wrist and throat. Then the knife fell from numbed fingers and Stanson stared from a congested face, eyes popping, mouth open for the air he couldn't suck into his lungs.

He was dead when Learhy finally released him. He had strained upwards towards the last,

flinging himself against the light gravity and, when released, he hovered for a moment towards the region of null-G along the axis of the ship. Then Learhy pulled him down and sat him on the floor against the boxes so that he could stare at the candle he had made. Against the boxes which held the looted wealth of the *Armitage*, the fruit of the great idea. Down on the floor where the air was too thick and stale for living lungs.

Down in the dirt where he belonged.

The tiny flame flickered, ebbing and almost quenched by rushing shadows before it rose again, a soldier of light battling against the relentless dark. Learhy tensed in automatic reflex then relaxed as the flame steadied. The flame still burned, he could still breathe. The light still shone, he could still see. And while he breathed and could see, he was alive. He could feel and hope and remember. He could think and let the haloed flame dim his vision as it danced and swayed on its sagging column of grey. A tiny flicker of gold surrounded by masses of dark. Darkness so like the strands of a woman's hair . . .

A strange girl, Lorna, a product of the Luna slums, hard and ruthless, ready and willing to take what she wanted, and pay the price if she had to. But hard and clever as she was,

she hadn't realised that in any gamble there was only one real winner, and that in the gamble of life that winner was fore-ordained.

Klien, too; he had taken his chances, and, like the girl, like Stanson, he had lost as he had to lose. As Learhy himself had to lose in the long run. As all men had to lose. For in the gamble of life death is the only winner.

But death can be cheated for a short time, and, men being what they are, Learhy still hoped that the air would last, that the candle would burn until the ship coasted free of the storm and life returned to the dead thing of metal and plastic, wires and instruments. The air would flow then and there would be light and humming power and the entire System to rove in.

If the air lasted out.

If the candle continued to burn.

So he sat and watched and died a little more each time the flame died, and lived a little less each time it rose to beat back the dark. He sat and waited because there was nothing else he could do, sat and felt himself going slowly insane to the pulse of the flame . . .

. . . As it died.

. . . As it rose.

. . . As it died.

Waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting . . .

Not even knowing how to pray.

Mr. ADAM

by

PAT FRANK

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY GOLLANCZ

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GRZDLE

by KEN WAINWRIGHT

The aliens couldn't speak highly enough of it and, of course, the Earthman wanted one. He was rather surprised to find out just what it was.

THE FAT MAN WORE A conservative suit of orange picked out with yellow piping. His hair was a glistening mass of tight black curls but his eyes were shrewd and his manner confident. He plumped heavily in a chair, mopped his face with a handkerchief and came straight to the point.

"My name is Whayland, Mr. Johnson. I need your help."

"Glad to hear it." Fred Johnson, tall, lean, looking a little like a whitewashed crow in his suit of black and white checks, leaned back and stared at his visitor. The orange suit was made of expensive materials, the few items of jewellery had cost a lot of money, the physical discomfort told of a soft life. His age, Fred guessed, was around sixty, though it was hard to be sure now that the cosmeti-

cians were so good at their trade. He waited for Whayland to speak.

"Glad to hear it?"

"Sure." Fred was honest. "Nothing personal, you understand, but your grief is my living." He leaned forward. "Just what is your trouble, Whayland?"

The fat man hesitated. The hesitation was nothing new to Fred. Most people, even after they had decided to call in the experts, were reluctant to unburden themselves. He tried to make things easier for his visitor.

"Marital trouble? Police trouble? A duelling threat you can't handle? Someone you want taken care of?" He smiled his man-to-man smile. "Just name it and I'll fix it."

"Even murder?" Whayland, obviously, was going to be difficult.

"Let's not go into details,"

said Fred. "If you have a toothache you go to a dentist. You don't argue about what he does, you are satisfied with the result. The same if you are ill, you trust the doctor. The things which trouble most people are the things outside of their experience. I provide the experience and eliminate whatever it may be that is causing you concern. How I do it, what means I employ are none of your business."

"But the legality?"

"Please." Fred remembered to be patient. "Trouble-shooters are a part of our way of life. Look at it this way. You are not held responsible for anything a psychiatrist may do to eliminate your mental strain; equally so you are not held responsible for anything I may do to eliminate a physical one."

"In other words I tell you my troubles, pay your fee, and then forget all about it. Right?"

"Right." Fred resumed his smile. "Now, if you will just give me the details we can get this thing settled."

"I hope so." Whayland used his handkerchief again. "I want you to get me a Grzdle."

"A what?"

"A Grzdle." Incredibly the fat man blushed. "I want you to be discreet about it. I don't want my wife to know. She," he coughed, "she might not understand."

"I see." Fred wiped his palms

beneath the desk. He didn't take kindly to practical jokes. Whayland produced his wallet just in time to save himself from being thrown out. Slowly, he counted out a sheaf of bills.

"You might have a little trouble getting one," he said. "If you need more money let me know."

"I'll do that." Fred reached for the bills.

"About how long do you think it will take?"

"That depends." Fred looked thoughtful. "Just leave it to me. I'll bring it to you as soon as I have it."

"Good." Whayland dabbed at his face again, seemed about to say something, then changed his mind. Fred heard his ponderous footsteps fade down the hall. Alone, he stared at the money. He had a commission, a client, and a heap of cash. There was only one thing wrong.

He didn't have the slightest idea of what a Grzdle was.

The man at the Information Centre didn't know either.

"Grzdle? Grzdle? Oh, you mean Grzdle!"

"That's what I said," agreed Fred. "Where do I get one?"

"What is it?" The man looked up from his electronic file. "Food? Artifact?"

"Don't ask me," snapped Fred. "If I knew I wouldn't be here."

"No," said the man thoughtfully.

"No, I suppose not." He rifled cards and pressed buttons. "Would it be a kind of cheese made from fermenting the milk of goats and flavouring it with mushrooms?"

"I doubt it. What gives you that idea?"

"There's a word in Polish sounds much like Grzdle. Or would it be a village dance performed to the tune of tambourines?"

"I doubt that either." Fred couldn't imagine Whayland wanting to add either to his possessions.

"Then I'm beat." The man cleared his file. "Nothing like that word in the records." He snapped his fingers. "Say! Would it be alien?"

"Might be." Fred hadn't thought of that. Since interstellar flight had widened the frontiers new words were creeping into the language all the time. At the Interstellar Terminal he struck pay-dirt.

"Grzdle." The receptionist, a thin, clothes-horse of a woman, gave a sharp nod. "Vegan."

"Good." Fred felt a rush of relief. Whayland, from the look of him, had been important. A successful finish to this assignment could mean further work and plenty of personal recommendations. "Where can I buy one?"

"You can't." The woman gave him a frosty smile. "There aren't any on Earth as far as we know."

"So? What are they then?"

"I've answered your question, young man," snapped the female.

"If you want more information you'll have to speak to Mr. Lantry."

Lantry was the customs inspector. He pursed his lips when Fred told him what he wanted.

"A Grzdle." He shook his head. "None have been imported, and I doubt if any will. The Vegans set incredible store by them."

"I see." Fred was beginning to find out some of the difficulties of his assignment. "Just what are they?" he said casually. "A Grzdle, I mean."

"I don't know," said Lantry promptly. "No one knows. No Terrestrial has ever seen one, and I doubt if they ever will."

"How's that?"

"I told you. The Vegans regard their Grzdzles as things of infinite value."

"But what are they for?" Fred had the feeling that he was pounding his head against a wall. "What can these things do?"

"We know that," said Lantry. "At least we know what the Vegans say they can do. According to them, the Vegans, I mean, a Grzdle is the one thing which can make a man supremely happy. Without one, again according to the Vegans, a man is lost, drifting, a soulless wanderer without hope, joy or contentment. But once he gets a Grzdle all that is changed. It feeds him, provides endless pleasure, fulfils the most important function of life and lives only to take care of

its owner." Lantry eased his collar again.

"This is only a rough outline, of course; we're still having translation difficulties, but I think I've given you the basics. I can't even begin to tell you of the poetic frenzy the Vegans reach when they begin to go into detail. Not that it's very clear; translation trouble, you know, but there's no denying their excitement."

"How so?"

"They talk about them all the time. They can't seem to get their minds off the subject." Lantry looked a little guilty. "To tell you the truth I wouldn't mind getting a Grzdle myself. If half of what they say is true, a Grzdle is the gateway to a sort of earthly paradise." He sighed. "No chance of that though. Not unless a man could pick one up on Vega."

Which, as Fred could see, was the only answer.

Whayland made no complaint. From the tone of his voice and expression on the vid-plate Fred guessed that the man was so wife-ridden that a Grzdle was worth even the high passage charge. Booking passage was something else. Not many ships left for Vega, and he had to settle for a beaten-up old freighter carrying trade goods and a handful of passengers to the newly-discovered planet.

He was lucky at that. The hyp-

med was young enough to be efficient, and old enough to be tolerant, and sold him a grey dream for an extra fifty credits. A black dream would have cost twice as much, but Fred was normal enough to be satisfied with the illusion of living in a harem rather than the more exotic, and far more illegal, special versions. Having travelled in interstellar ships before, Fred knew better than to trust to the routine illusions supplied as part of passage. The blue laws were pretty strict, and he didn't want to spend a couple of months singing in some faked heavenly choir or living a nice, monotonous, utterly moral ideal.

The fifty credits had been worth it. Fred blinked to normal awareness just as the ship orbited the planet. The off-watch crew, looking a little haggard from their own, specially laid-on illusions, hurried to their stations. The hyp-med grinned as he saw Fred.

"Satisfied?"

"I'm not complaining." Fred returned the grin. "Don't let anyone ever tell you that you're short on imagination."

"I read books." The hyp-med yawned. "One day I'll take a trip and travel in comfort. Staying awake and normally aware in these cans is getting beyond a joke. The money's good, but the boredom is killing." He glanced through the view port towards the swelling bulk of the planet below. "Even at

that I guess we're lucky. Other races have to do it the hard way, We can hypnotise ourselves into believing that we're someplace else." He looked at Fred. "Staying long?"

"I don't think so. Just long enough to pick up a Grzdle. Why?"

"Just that we'll be heading back home in a couple of days. Thought you'd like to return with us. Might be a couple of months before another ship's due in." He seemed to remember something. "Grzdle, you say?"

"That's right. This is the place to find them, isn't it?"

"You could say that." The hyp-med seemed to be having trouble keeping his face straight. "Yes, I guess you've come to the right place for a Grzdle."

"Good. Guess I'll be travelling back with you then."

"You mean that you want one?"

"Sure, why not?" Fred felt himself becoming irritated. "Say, what's all the mystery about, anyway?"

"No mystery." The hyp-med struggled to master a sudden fit of coughing. "I was just wondering what you want one for."

"It isn't for me," explained Fred. He didn't know what a Grzdle was, but he didn't want to get a reputation he didn't deserve. From all accounts a Grzdle was pretty hot stuff. "It's for a friend."

"Naturally." The hyp-med looked wise.

"What the hell!" Fred was becoming angry. "Nothing wrong with a man wanting a Grzdle, is there?"

"Well, now, that depends," said the hyp-med slowly. "Some men might want one, and then again some men might not. It all depends."

"Quit stalling," yelled Fred. "Are there or aren't there Grzdlas on Vega?"

"There are."

"Can I or can I not get one?"

"I expect you can," said the hyp-med. He stared at Fred in thoughtful wonder. "But, man, have you ever seen a Vegan?"

It took Fred two days to find out what he was getting at.

It was a hard two days. The kindest thing anyone could say about the Vegans was that they were not beautiful. In fact, they were downright repulsive. About three feet tall, they had four legs, two arms, three eyes and an oversized mouth filled with quite efficient teeth. A horde of them came boiling after Fred as he raced for the safety of the landing field. He made it just in time, sweating and shivering as they milled around the perimeter fence and praying that the rocket wouldn't leave without him.

The hyp-med, his face split by a grin, came to him just after take-off.

"Seems you had a little trouble," he said pleasantly.

"Trouble's not the word." Fred shivered again. "I spent the first day trying to learn the language. I can feel the headache from that hypno-tutor yet. Then I went in search of what I came for."

"The Grzdle." The hyp-med laughed. "Did you get one?"

Fred called him a name, then another, then told the grinning hyp-med exactly what he thought of him. As a member of the crew, the hyp-med couldn't take direct revenge, but he got his own back anyway. Fred spent the next two months sweating beneath the illusion that he was in a condemned cell waiting to be thrown to the lions. Riding the cargo would have been better, and cheaper, and the worst part of it was that he couldn't complain.

He radioed ahead when the ship left star-drive and Whayland was waiting for him at the landing field.

"Got it?" The fat man was pathetic in his eagerness. "The Grzdle, did you get it?"

"I'll tell you later." Fred's ears burned to the sound of laughter from the crew. That louse of a hyp-med had probably spread the story. Savagely, he guided Whayland to a waiting turbtax and didn't relax until they had left the field.

"Well?" Whayland was impatient. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?"

"The thing I sent you for. The

Grzdle." The fat man held out his hand. "Where is it?"

"The Grzdle!" Fred said something both vehement and expressive. He glared at his employer. "Do you know what I've been through on your account? Four months of my life wasted, two of them spent waiting to be slaughtered. A king-sized headache from trying to learn a language that just can't be learned by any normal, intelligent, human being. Chased by a bunch of monsters crying for my blood. And for what?"

"For money," said Whayland reasonably. He grew stern. "Listen, Johnson, I hired you to do a job for me. I never said it was easy; if it had been I would have done it myself. Now stop feeling sorry for yourself and get to the point. Did you or did you not get a Grzdle?"

"I did not get a Grzdle."

"Then . . . ?"

Fred sighed and took out a cigarette. He lit it, inhaling and holding the smoke in his lungs. He looked at Whayland.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "But you're wrong. I didn't fail, either."

"You haven't got a Grzdle," reminded Whayland.

"I still haven't failed." Fred drew on his cigarette. "Semantic confusion," he said. "We contact a new alien race and a few members of that race visit us. There are, naturally, language difficulties. Words which mean one thing to

one race mean something a little different to another. Some words make sense while other words seem to make no sense at all."

"So?"

"So we have to go by analogies, guesses and sheer luck. An alien race tries to describe something to us by going all around it because we don't know what they mean when they use a word. A thing like that can cause a little confusion at times, especially when the race is new and the language especially difficult."

"I see what you're getting at." Whayland echoed his disappointment. "A Grzdle then, is a concept, an abstract, something unreal."

"No." Fred shook his head. "It's real all right." He stared out of the window. "Terrestrials are lucky," he said. "We can be

hypnotized and so make flight-time pass quickly and pleasantly. The Vegans have to sweat out every moment of it. So, when they're away from home they get a little homesick. They talk of all the good things they've left behind them, the thing they want to get back to, and fast."

"A Grzdle." Whayland blinked. "Then it's real."

"I told you it was." Fred crushed out the cigarette. "Something which provides a man with everything he needs, comforts him, feeds him, fulfils the prime function of the race, makes him happy, is obedient and is joy incarnate."

"A Grzdle," whispered Whayland. "I wish I had one."

"You've got one," said Fred. "Grzdle is Vegan for wife."

FORECAST

Lovers of space battles and galactic intrigue will enjoy next month's lead story by Brian W. Aldiss. **WHAT TRIUMPHS?** deals with a rather peculiar hero. Peculiar in that he can drink poison, has no fear, can bend men to his will and carries a most peculiar message. A message which embraces one of the most novel ideas in science fiction I have read for some time.

PATIENT OF PROMISE, by Nigel Lloyd, shows that practical jokers should be careful—they might not be joking.

SONGS OF SUMMER, by Robert Silverberg, deals with the adventures of a man who jumped forward in time and tried to rebuild his own brand of civilisation.

COPY CAT, by Robert Presslie, points out that even the most innocuous of pastimes can be anything but innocuous if the circumstances should alter.

NO GREATER LOVE . . . by Nicholas Canadine, is an unusual tale of a man who fought an alien enemy with the only weapon he could use. And risked more than his life in doing it.

THE CAGE, by Bertram Chandler, poses a neat problem. How do you define rational behaviour?

IT'S SUCH A BEAUTIFUL DAY, by Isaac Asimov, concerns itself with a rebel and a Door. Not an ordinary door but a rather special Door.

Collecting Team

by

ROBERT SILVERBERG

The planet was swarming with interesting fauna. It was almost too good to be true and the zoological scientists felt they were in paradise. They were somewhere all right, but it wasn't paradise.

FROM FIFTY THOUSAND MILES up, the situation looked promising. It was a middle-sized, brown-and-green, inviting-looking planet, with no sign of cities or any other such complications. Just a pleasant sort of place, the very sort we were looking for to redeem what had been a pretty futile expedition.

I turned to Clyde Holdreth, who was staring reflectively at the thermocouple.

"Well? What do you think?"

"Looks fine to me. Temperature's about seventy down there—nice and warm, and plenty of air. I think it's worth a try."

Lee Davison came strolling out from the storage hold, smelling of

animals, as usual. He was holding one of the blue monkeys we picked up on Alpheraz, and the little beast was crawling up his arm. "Have we found something, gentlemen?"

"We've found a planet," I said. "How's the storage space in the hold?"

"Don't worry about that. We've got room for a whole zooful more, before we get filled up. It hasn't been a very fruitful trip."

"No," I agreed. "It hasn't. Well? Shall we go down and see what's to be seen?"

"Might as well," Holdreth said. "We can't go back to Earth with just a couple of blue monkeys and some ant-eaters, you know."



PP GREEN.

"I'm in favour of a landing, too," said Davison. "You?"

I nodded. "I'll set up the charts, and you get your animals all comfortable for deceleration."

Davison disappeared back into the storage hold, while Holdreth scribbled furiously in the log book, writing down the co-ordinates of the planet below, its general description, and so forth. Aside from being a collecting team for the zoological department of the Bureau of Interstellar Affairs, we also double as a survey ship, and the planet down below was listed as *unexplored*.

I glanced out at the mottled brown-and-green ball spinning slowly in the viewport, and felt the warning twinge of gloom that came to me every time we made a landing on a new and strange world. Repressing it, I started to figure out a landing orbit. From behind me came the furious chatter of the blue monkeys as Davison strapped them into their acceleration cradles, and under that the deep, unmusical honking of the Rigelian ant-eaters, bleating their displeasure noisily.

The planet was inhabited, all right. We hadn't had the ship on the ground more than a minute before the local fauna began to congregate. We stood at the view-

port and looked out in wonder.

"This is one of those things you dream about," Davison said, stroking his little beard nervously. "Look at them! There must be a thousand different species out there."

"I've never seen anything like it," said Holdreth.

I computed how much storage space we had left and how many of the thronging creatures outside we would be able to bring back with us. "How are we going to decide what to take and what to leave behind?"

"Does it matter?" Holdreth said gaily. "This is what you call an embarrassment of riches, I guess. We just grab the dozen most bizarre creatures and blast off—and save the rest for another trip. It's too bad we wasted all that time wandering around near Rigel."

"We *did* get the anteaters," Davison pointed out. They were his finds, and he was proud of them.

I smiled sourly. "Yeah. We got the anteaters there." The anteaters honked at that moment, loud and clear. "You know, that's one set of beasts I think I could do without."

"Bad attitude," Holdreth said. "Unprofessional."

"Whoever said I was a zoologist, anyway? I'm just a spaceship pilot,

remember. And if I don't like the way those anteaters talk—and smell—I see no reason why I——”

“Say, look at that one,” Davison said suddenly.

I glanced out the viewport and saw a new beast emerging from the thick-packed vegetation in the background. I've seen some fairly strange creatures since I was assigned to the zoological department, but this one took the grand prize.

It was about the size of a giraffe, moving on long, wobbly legs and with a tiny head up at the end of a preposterous neck. Only it had six legs and a bunch of writhing snake-like tentacles as well, and its eyes, great violet globes, stood out nakedly on the ends of two thick stalks. It must have been twenty feet high. It moved with exaggerated grace through the swarm of beasts surrounding our ship, pushed its way smoothly toward the vessel, and peered gravely in at the viewport. One purple eye stared directly at me, the other at Davison. Oddly, it seemed to me as if it were trying to tell us something.

“Big one, isn't it?” Davison said finally.

“I'll bet you'd like to bring one back, too.”

“Maybe we can fit a young one aboard,” Davison said. “If we can find a young one.” He turned to

Holdreth. “How's that air analysis coming? I'd like to get out there and start collecting. God, that's a crazy-looking beast!”

The animal outside had apparently finished its inspection of us, for it pulled its head away and, gathering its legs under itself, squatted near the ship. A small dog-like creature with stiff spines running along its back began to bark at the big creature, which took no notice. The other animals, which came in all shapes and sizes, continued to mill around the ship, evidently very curious about the newcomer to their world. I could see Davison's eyes thirsty with the desire to take the whole kit and caboodle back to Earth with him. I knew what was running through his mind. He was dreaming of the umpteen thousand species of extra-terrestrial wild life roaming around out there, and to each one he was attaching a neat little tag: *Something-or-other davisoni*.

“The air's fine,” Holdreth announced abruptly, looking up from his test tubes. “Get your butterfly nets and let's see what we can catch.”

There was something I didn't like about the place. It was just too good to be true, and I learned long ago that nothing ever is. There's always a catch someplace.

Only this seemed to be on the level. The planet was a bonanza for zoologists, and Davison and Holdreth were having the time of their lives, hipdeep in obliging specimens.

"I've never seen anything like it," Davison said for at least the fiftieth time, as he scooped up a small purplish squirrel-like creature and examined it curiously. The squirrel stared back, examining Davison just as curiously.

"Let's take some of these," Davison said. "I like them."

"Carry 'em on in, then," I said, shrugging. I didn't care which specimens they chose, so long as they filled up the storage hold quickly and let me blast off on schedule. I watched as Davison grabbed a pair of the squirrels and brought them into the ship.

Holdreth came over to me. He was carrying a sort of a dog with insect-faceted eyes and gleaming furless skin. "How's this one, Gus?"

"Fine," I said bleakly. "Wonderful."

He put the animal down—it didn't scamper away, just sat there smiling at us—and looked at me. He ran a hand through his fast-vanishing hair. "Listen, Gus, you've been gloomy all day. What's eating you?"

"I don't like this place," I said.

"Why? Just on general principles?"

"It's too *easy*, Clyde. Much too easy. These animals just flock around here waiting to be picked up."

Holdreth chuckled. "And you're used to a struggle, aren't you? You're just angry at us because we have it so simple here!"

"When I think of the trouble we went through just to get a pair of miserable, vile-smelling anteaters, and——"

"Come off it, Gus. We'll load up in a hurry, if you like. But this place is a zoological gold mine!"

I shook my head. "I don't like it, Clyde. Not at all."

Holdreth laughed again and picked up his facet-eyed dog. "Say, know where I can find another of these, Gus?"

"Right over there," I said, pointing. "By that tree. With its tongue hanging out. It's just waiting to be carried away."

Holdreth looked and smiled. "What do you know about that!" He snared his specimen and carried both of them inside.

I walked away to survey the grounds. The planet was too flatly incredible for me to accept on face value, without at least a look-see, despite the blithe way my two

companions were snapping up specimens.

For one thing, animals just don't exist this way—in big miscellaneous quantities, living all together happily. I hadn't noticed more than a few of each kind, and there must have been five hundred different species, each one stranger-looking than the next. Nature doesn't work that way.

For another, they all seemed to be on friendly terms with one another, though they acknowledged the unofficial leadership of the giraffe-like creature. Nature doesn't work *that* way, either. I hadn't seen one quarrel between the animals yet. That argued that they were all herbivores, which doesn't make sense ecologically.

I shrugged my shoulders and walked on.

Half an hour later, I knew a little more about the geography of our bonanza. We were on either an immense island or a peninsula of some sort, because I could see a huge body of water bordering the land some ten miles off. Our vicinity was fairly flat, except for a good-sized hill from which I could see the terrain.

There was a thick, heavily-wooded jungle not too far from the ship. The forest spread out

all the way toward the water in one direction, but ended abruptly in the other. We had brought the ship down right at the edge of the clearing. Apparently most of the animals we saw lived in the jungle.

On the other side of our clearing was a low, broad plain that seemed to trail away into a desert in the distance; I could see an uninviting stretch of barren sand that contrasted strangely with the fertile jungle to my left. There was a small lake to the side. It was, I saw, the sort of country likely to attract a varied fauna, since there seemed to be every sort of habitat within a small area.

And the fauna! Although I'm a zoologist only by osmosis, picking up both my interest and my knowledge second-hand from Holdreth and Davison, I couldn't help but be astonished by the wealth of strange animals. They came in all different shapes and sizes, colours and odours, and the only thing they all had in common was their friendliness. During the course of my afternoon's wanderings a hundred animals must have come marching boldly right up to me, given me the once-over, and walked away. This included half a dozen kinds that I hadn't seen before, plus one of the eye-stalked, intelligent-looking giraffes and a furless dog. Again the giraffe

seemed to be trying to communicate.

I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all.

I returned to our clearing, and saw Holdreth and Davison still buzzing madly around, trying to cram as many animals as they could into our hold.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Hold's all full," Davison said. "We're busy making our alternate selections now." I saw him carrying out Holdreth's two furless dogs and picking up, instead, a pair of eight-legged penguinish things that uncomplainingly allowed themselves to be carried in. Holdreth was frowning unhappily.

"What do you want *those* for, Lee? Those dog-like ones seem much more interesting, don't you think?"

"No," Davison said. "I'd rather bring along these two. They're curious beasts, aren't they? Look at the muscular network that connects the——"

"Hold it, fellows," I said. I peered at the animal in Davison's hands and glanced up. "This is a curious beast," I said. "It's got eight legs."

"You becoming a zoologist?" Holdreth asked, amused.

"No—but I am getting puzzled. Why should this one have eight

legs, some of the others have six, and some of the others only four?"

They looked at me blankly, with the scorn of professionals.

"I mean, there ought to be some sort of logic to evolution here, shouldn't there? On Earth we've developed a four-legged pattern of animal life; on Mars they usually run to six legs. But have you ever seen an evolutionary hodge-podge like this place before?"

"There are stranger set-ups," Holdreth said. "The symbiotes on Sirius Three, the burrowers of Mizar—but you're right, Gus. This is a peculiar evolutionary dispersal. I think we ought to stay and investigate it fully."

Instantly I knew from the bright expression on Davison's face that I had blundered, had made things worse than ever. I decided to take a new tack.

"I don't agree," I said. "I think we ought to leave with what we've got, and come back with a larger expedition later."

Davison chuckled. "Come on, Gus, don't be silly! This is a chance of a lifetime for us—why should we call in the whole zoological department on it?"

I didn't want to tell them I was afraid of staying longer. I crossed my arms. "Lee, I'm the pilot of this ship, and you'll have to listen to me. The schedule calls for

a brief stop-over here, and we have to leave. Don't tell me I'm being silly."

"But you are, man! You're standing blindly in the path of scientific investigation, of——"

"Listen to me, Lee. Our food is calculated on a pretty narrow margin, to allow you fellows more room for storage. And this is strictly a collecting team. There's no provision for extended stays on any one planet. Unless you want to wind up eating your own specimens, I suggest you allow us to get out of here."

They were silent for a moment. Then Holdreth said: "I guess we can't argue with that, Lee. Let's listen to Gus and go back now. There's plenty of time to investigate this place later."

"But—oh, all right," Davison said reluctantly. He picked up the eight-legged penguins. "Let me stash these things in the hold, and we can leave." He looked strangely at me, as if I had done something criminal.

As he started into the ship, I called to him.

"What is it, Gus?"

"Look here, Lee. I don't *want* to pull you away from here. It's simply a matter of food," I lied, masking my nebulous suspicions.

"I know how it is, Gus." He turned and entered the ship.

I stood there thinking about nothing at all for a moment, then went inside myself to begin setting up the blastoff orbit.

I got as far as calculating the fuel expenditure when I noticed something. Feed wires were dangling crazily down from the control cabinet. Somebody had wrecked our drive mechanism, but thoroughly.

For a long moment, I stared stiffly at the sabotaged drive. Then I turned and headed into the storage hold.

"Davison?"

"What is it, Gus?"

"Come out here a second, will you?"

I waited, and a few minutes later he appeared, frowning impatiently. "What do you want, Gus? I'm busy and I——" His mouth dropped open. "*Look at the drive!*"

"You look at it," I snapped. "I'm sick. Go get Holdreth, on the double."

While he was gone I tinkered with the shattered mechanism. Once I had the cabinet panel off and could see the inside, I felt a little better; the drive wasn't damaged beyond repair, though it had been pretty well scrambled. Three or four days of hard work with a screwdriver and solderbeam

might get the ship back into functioning order.

But that didn't make me any less angry. I heard Holdreth and Davison entering behind me, and I whirled to face them.

"All right, you idiots. Which one of you did this?"

They opened their mouths in protesting squawks at the same instant. I listened to them for a while, then said: "One at a time!"

"If you're implying that one of us deliberately sabotaged the ship," Holdreth said, "I want you to know——"

"I'm not implying anything. But the way it looks to me, you two decided you'd like to stay here a while longer to continue your investigations, and figured the easiest way of getting me to agree was to wreck the drive." I glared hotly at them. "Well, I've got news for you. I can fix this, and I can fix it in a couple of days. So go on—get about your business! Get all the zoologizing you can in, while you still have time. I——"

Davison laid a hand gently on my arm. "Gus," he said quietly, "*we didn't do it*. Neither of us."

Suddenly all the anger drained out of me and was replaced by raw fear. I could see that Davison meant it.

"If you didn't do it, and

Holdreth didn't do it, and I didn't do it—then who did?"

Davison shrugged.

"Maybe it's one of us who doesn't know he's doing it," I suggested. "Maybe——" I stopped. "Oh, that's nonsense. Hand me that tool kit, will you, Lee?"

They left to tend to the animals, and I set to work on the repair job, dismissing all further speculations and suspicions from my mind, concentrating solely on joining Lead A to Input A and Transistor F to Potentiometer K, as indicated. It was slow, nerve-harrowing work, and by mealtime I had accomplished only the barest preliminaries. My fingers were starting to quiver from the strain of small-scale work, and I decided to give up the job for the day and get back to it tomorrow.

I slept uneasily, my nightmares punctuated by the moaning of the accursed anteaters and the occasional squeals, chuckles, bleats, and hisses of the various other creatures in the hold. It must have been four in the morning before I dropped off into a really sound sleep, and what was left of the night passed swiftly. The next thing I knew, hands were shaking me, and I was looking up into the pale, tense faces of Holdreth and Davison.

I pushed my sleep-stuck eyes

open and blinked. "Huh? What's going on?"

Holdreth leaned down and shook me savagely. "Get up, Gus!"

I struggled to my feet slowly. "Hell of a thing to do, wake a fellow up in the middle of the——"

I found myself being propelled from my cabin and led down the corridor to the control room. Blearily, I followed where Holdreth pointed, and then I woke up in a hurry.

The drive was battered again. Someone—or *something*—had completely undone my repair job of the night before.

If there had been bickering among us, it stopped. This was past the category of a joke now; it couldn't be laughed off, and we found ourselves working together as a tight unit again, trying desperately to solve the puzzle before it was too late.

"Let's review the situation," Holdreth said, pacing nervously up and down the control cabin. "The drive has been sabotaged twice. None of us knows who did it, and on a conscious level each of us is convinced *he* didn't do it."

He paused. "That leaves us with two possibilities. Either, as Gus suggested, one of us is doing it unaware of it even to himself, or

someone else is doing it while we're not looking. Neither possibility is a very cheerful one."

"We can stay on guard, though," I said. "Here's what I propose: first, have one of us awake at all times—sleep in shifts, that is, with somebody guarding the drive until I get it fixed. Two—jettison all the animals aboard ship."

"What?"

"He's right," Davison said. "We don't know what we may have brought aboard. They don't seem to be intelligent, but we can't be sure. That purple-eyed baby giraffe, for instance—suppose he's been hypnotizing us into damaging the drive ourselves? How can we tell?"

"Oh, but——" Holdreth started to protest, then stopped and frowned soberly. "I suppose we'll have to admit the possibility," he said, obviously unhappy about the prospect of freeing our captives. "We'll empty out the hold, and you see if you can get the drive fixed. Maybe later we'll recapture them all, if nothing further develops."

We agreed to that, and Holdreth and Davison cleared the ship of its animal cargo while I set to work determinedly at the drive mechanism. By nightfall, I had managed to accomplish as much as I had the day before.

I sat up as watch the first shift, aboard the strangely quiet ship. I paced around the drive cabin, fighting the great temptation to doze off, and managed to last through until the time Holdreth arrived to relieve me.

Only—when he showed up, he gasped and pointed at the drive. It had been ripped apart a third time.

Now we had no excuse, no explanation. The expedition had turned into a nightmare.

I could only protest that I had remained awake my entire spell on duty, and that I had seen no one and no thing approach the drive panel. But that was hardly a satisfactory explanation, since it either cast guilt on me as the saboteur or implied that some unseen external power was repeatedly wrecking the drive. Neither hypothesis made sense, at least to me.

By now we had spent four days on the planet, and food was getting to be a major problem. My carefully-budgeted flight schedule called for us to be two days out on our return journey to Earth by now, and we still were no closer to departure than we had been four days ago.

The animals continued to wander around outside, nosing up

against the ship, examining it, almost fondling it, with those damned pseudo-giraffes staring soulfully at us always. The beasts were as friendly as ever, little knowing how the tension was growing within the hull. The three of us walked around like zombies, eyes bright and lips clamped. We were scared—all of us.

Something was keeping us from fixing the drive.

Something didn't want us to leave this planet.

I looked at the bland face of the purple-eyed giraffe staring through the viewport, and it stared mildly back at me. Around it was grouped the rest of the local fauna, the same incredible hodge-podge of improbable genera and species.

That night, the three of us stood guard in the control room together. The drive was smashed, anyway. The wires were soldered in so many places by now that the control panel was a mass of shining alloy, and I knew that a few more such sabotagings and it would be impossible to patch it together any more—if it wasn't so already.

The next night, I just didn't knock off. I continued soldering right on after dinner (and a pretty skimpy dinner it was, now that we were on close rations) and far on into the night.

By morning, it was as if I hadn't done a thing.

"I give up," I announced, surveying the damage. "I don't see any sense in ruining my nerves trying to fix a thing that won't stay fixed."

Holdreth nodded. He looked terribly pale. "We'll have to find some new approach."

"Yeah. Some new approach."

I yanked open the food closet and examined our stock. Even figuring in the synthetics we would have fed to the animals if we hadn't released them, we were low on food. We had overstayed even the safety margin. It would be a hungry trip back—if we ever did get back.

I clambered through the hatch and sprawled down on a big rock near the ship. One of the furless dogs came over and nuzzled in my shirt. Davison stepped to the hatch and called down to me.

"What are you doing out there, Gus?"

"Just getting a little fresh air. I'm sick of living aboard that ship." I scratched the dog behind his pointed ears, and looked around.

The animals had lost most of their curiosity about us, and didn't congregate the way they used to. They were meandering all over the plain, nibbling at little deposits of a white doughy substance. It

precipitated every night. "Manna," we called it. All the animals seemed to live on it.

I folded my arms and leaned back.

We were getting to look awfully lean by the eighth day. I wasn't even trying to fix the ship any more; the hunger was starting to get me. But I saw Davison puttering around with my solderbeam.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to repair the drive," he said. "You don't want to, but we can't just sit around, you know." His nose was deep in my repair guide, and he was fumbling with the release on the solderbeam.

"Gus?"

"Yeah?"

"I think it's time I told you something. I've been eating the manna for four days. It's good. It's nourishing stuff."

"You've been eating—the manna? Something that grows on an alien world? You crazy?"

"What else can we do? Starve?"

I smiled feebly, admitting that he was right. From somewhere in the back of the ship came the sounds of Holdreth moving around. Holdreth had taken this thing worse than any of us. He had a family back on Earth, and he was beginning to realize that he wasn't ever going to see them again.

"Why don't you get Holdreth?" Davison suggested. "Go out there and stuff yourselves with the manna. You've got to eat something."

"Yeah. What can I lose?" Moving like a mechanical man, I headed toward Holdreth's cabin. We would go out and eat the manna and cease being hungry, one way or another.

"Clyde?" I called. "Clyde?"

I entered his cabin. He was sitting at his desk, shaking convulsively, staring at the two streams of blood that trickled in red spurts from his slashed wrists.

"Clyde!"

He made no protest as I dragged him toward the infirmary cabin and got tourniquets around his arms, cutting off the bleeding. He just stared dully ahead, sobbing.

I slapped him and he came around. He shook his head dizzily, as if he didn't know where he was.

"I—I——"

"Easy, Clyde. Everything's all right."

"It's *not* all right," he said hollowly. "I'm still alive. Why didn't you let me die? Why didn't you——"

We had Holdreth straightened around by evening. Davison gath-

ered as much manna as he could find, and we held a feast.

"I wish we had nerve enough to kill one of the local fauna," Davison said. "Then we'd have a feast—steaks and everything!"

"The bacteria," Holdreth pointed out quietly. "We don't dare."

"I know. But it's a thought."

"No more thoughts," I said sharply. "Tomorrow morning we start work on the drive panel again. Maybe with some food in our bellies we'll be able to keep awake and see what's happening here."

Holdreth smiled. "Good. I can't wait to get out of this ship and back to a normal existence. God, I just can't wait!"

"Let's get some sleep," I said. "Tomorrow we'll give it another try. We'll get back," I said with a confidence I didn't feel.

The following morning I rose early and got my tool kit. My head was clear, and I was trying to put the pieces together without much luck. I started toward the control cabin.

And stopped.

And looked out the viewport.

I went back and awoke Holdreth and Davison. "Take a look out the port," I said hoarsely.

They looked. They gaped.

"It looks just like my house," Holdreth said. "My house on Earth."

"With all the comforts of home inside, I'll bet." I walked forward uneasily and lowered myself through the hatch.

"Let's go look at it."

We approached it, while the animals frolicked around us. The big giraffe came near and shook its head gravely. The house stood in the middle of the clearing, small and neat and freshly-painted.

I saw it now. During the night, invisible hands had put it there. Had assembled and built a cozy little Earth-type house and dropped it next to our ship for us to live in.

"Just like my house," Holdreth repeated in wonderment.

"It should be," I said. "They grabbed the model from your mind, as soon as they found out we couldn't live on the ship indefinitely."

Holdreth and Davison asked as one: "What do you mean?"

"You mean you haven't figured this place out yet?" I licked my lips, getting myself used to the fact that I was going to spend the rest of my life here. "You mean you don't realize what this house is intended as?"

They shook their heads, baffled. I glanced around, from the house

to the useless ship to the jungle to the plain to the little pond. It all made sense now.

"They want to keep us happy," I said. "They knew we weren't thriving aboard the ship, so they—they built us something a little more like home."

"*They?* The giraffes?"

"Forget the giraffes. They tried to warn us, but it's too late. They're intelligent beings, but they're prisoners just like us. I'm talking about the ones who run this place. The super-aliens who make us sabotage our own ship and not even know we're doing it, who stand some place up there and gape at us. The ones who dredged together this motley assortment of beasts from all over the galaxy. Now we've been collected, too. This whole damned place is just a zoo—a zoo for aliens so far ahead of us we don't dare dream of what they're like."

I looked up at the shimmering blue-green sky, where invisible bars seemed to restrain us, and sank down dismally on the porch of our new home. I was resigned. There wasn't any sense in struggling against *them*.

I could see the neat little placard now:

EARTHMEN. Native Habitat, Sol III.

A Problem in Psionics

by EDWARD MACKIN

The trouble with the machine was not that it didn't work but that it worked too well. But not quite in the way the designers had planned.

Illustrated by Adash

ROSIE PUT DOWN THE PLATE and scooted. I couldn't believe my eyes. A sausage roll looks awfully lonely on a large, white plate.

"Emilio!" I shouted. "Come here, you scoundrel! Emilio Batti!"

The other customers in Batti's restaurant looked round at me. I glared at them and they went back to their cereals and eggs and bacon. If there is one thing I cannot stand it is bad manners.

"Emilio!" I shouted again.

He came, reluctantly, his chef's hat like a white explosion, the boards creaking to his twenty stone. One of these days he will disappear through his own floor like a pantomime Mephistopheles and the world will have lost a great man. There are not many good cooks nowadays and there is only one Emilio.

"Yes, Hek Belov," he said blandly. "Is there something wrong?"

"Something wrong?" I nearly choked. "I ask for bacon and eggs and what do I get? A sausage roll! One miserable sausage roll! What kind of a crummy joint is this?"

Emilio drew himself up with a certain dignity.

"It is the kind of crummy joint where you can eat for a week without paying," he told me, while one hand shovelled invisible dirt on my head. "Now your credit is finish. What you think I live on, huh? How I make a profit? Every morning this week you have egg and bacon. Every night you have steak and chips and cherry pie, which I make special for you because you say nobody make cherry pie like Emilio. Always it is



tomorrow you pay; but tomorrow never comes."

"Emilio," I said placatingly. "There is no one in the whole world who can make cherry pie like you. I, Hek Belov, state it." I looked round the crowded restaurant; but nobody would meet my eye. "I admit I am penniless; but it could happen to anyone. Emilio, I beseech you—do not deprive me of my cherry pie. I will eat this—this thing, and I only hope it doesn't poison me. That's all."

Without a word Emilio snatched up the plate and disappeared into the kitchen with it. So there I was with a very bare table indeed and no hope of putting anything on it except my elbows, which I did. Cupping my chin in my hands I nearly gave way to despair.

I had my back to the door and so I didn't see anyone approach. The first thing I knew there was a hand on my shoulder and if there is anything more unnerving to a man in my unenviable position I haven't yet come across it.

I was certain it was one of my creditors, or the police, and I wondered how I was going to convince them that that last cheque was signed in good faith. It was just that I forgot about my overdraft.

"Hek Belov?" asked an official voice.

"My name is Thompson," I said, turning round with what I

hoped was a disarming smile. "Belov is my second cousin. We look rather alike." I tapped my, admittedly, generous nose. "The family resemblance is remarkable, is it not?"

The middle-aged man who wore the new, adjustable glasses, refocused them and peered at me with his penetrating grey eyes.

"I wouldn't know," he said. "You were pointed out to me as Hek Belov. Do you happen to know where I can get in touch with him? It's rather urgent. I went to his office; but it appears to be closed."

"Permanently," I told him. "By order of the Justices."

He looked startled.

"Why? What happened?"

"Debt," I shrugged. "He owed a lot of money, and creditors are so impatient these days. How much does he owe you?"

"He doesn't owe me anything. I'm chief cybernetics engineer with Robot Services. We're a new company, and we are having trouble with er—" he hesitated, "some experimental equipment. If you happen to see Belov tell him to get in touch with us. Goodbye, Mr. Thompson."

I grabbed him by the sleeve. Jobs are hard to get these days with all these self-repair machines.

"Thompson just left," I said. "I'm Hek Belov." I brushed a bit of the table clean. "Sit down, my friend," I told him. "You're an

emissary from Heaven. Have you eaten yet?"

"Yes I have eaten; but I wouldn't say no to a cup of coffee. If you really are Hek Belov..." he broke off, doubtfully.

"Yes, I really am Hek Belov, and I have the final notices to prove it." I pulled a wad of bills from an inside pocket, and threw them on the table. "This one is from the electric company. The rest are for rates, phone, furniture and various items. I have been accused of stealing the furniture as bailee, which is nonsense. I sold it to buy food. One must live. It is the first law of species. Yet for this I am a hunted man. It's a hard world, my friend. By the way," I said quickly, "could you possibly lend me a fiver? You can have it back as soon as your firm pay me for fixing whatever it is."

He shook his head.

"I haven't that much money with me," he said. "But I'll buy you a breakfast."

I hadn't expected less.

"Emilio!" I shouted. "Emilio!" I banged on the table, and I saw him poke his head out of the kitchen. "Ham and eggs, Emilio, you fat slug! And coffee! Lots of coffee!"

After the meal we took an air-taxi to Robot House, on the outskirts of the city and Simpson took me into a room where there was a computer. It was a huge

job, taking up the whole of one wall. In front of it stood a small robot, glossy black, and convincing.

"Does that thing work?" I asked.

"Of course it works," he said testily. "Wait till I switch on and you can give it an order."

He pushed a key into the robot's chest and turned it. The thing straightened slightly and its eyes glowed into life. We were being scanned.

"Give it an order," he said.

"Scratch my back," I told it facetiously.

The robot walked over and, to my discomfiture, gently did as it was told.

"Now ask it a question," said Simpson.

"What's the square root of minus one?" I inquired in an attempt to rescue my self-respect.

The answer didn't mean a damn thing to me; but I felt better for having thought of the question.

"All right, One, as you were," said Simpson.

The robot returned to its original position, and was switched off.

"Now let me introduce you to CHERUB," he said. "That's short for contemplative, homeostatic, encyclopædic, robot utilities brain. There he is. Right along that wall—30,000 electronic valves and transistor node units, the most intelligent piece of equipment on

earth. It cost three million pounds to develop and unless we get the bugs out of it we'll have to limit its functions to merely answering questions. In which case, the company drops a packet and perhaps its top cyberneticist." He gave a shudder. "I understand its awful cold outside."

"Even the huskies complain," I said. "But you are lucky. Out of a thousand charlatans and paper mechanics you have chosen the right one. I, Hek Belov, am the only practical man of the whole scabby bunch. Your job is safe, my friend. Your boss will pin a medal on you. In fact, you are in line for a substantial bonus. You will remember old Belov with gratitude. Now then, if you will just explain the set-up, and let me have a cigarette . . ."

I smoked dejectedly while he gave me a mathematical outline of the whole caboodle.

"I've got all that," I said at last. "You don't have to elaborate."

To tell the truth my head was still buzzing with at least fifty equations that I had never heard of before. Such nonsense! I can wire any digital computer you like to name, without consulting the plans and, in fact, blindfold! Let me see any of the clever-clever boys do that. Where most cyberneticists think in terms of mathematical symbols Belov thinks in terms of solid circuitry.

"Just give it to me in English

now," I told him," and we'll have this thing straightened out in a couple of hours."

Simpson sighed.

"I thought I'd have to," he said, whatever he meant by that. "Anyway, this is how it goes. The brain is still under test. It controls three robots at the moment; but it is designed to control at least ten thousand. They're chore-horses. There isn't any job they can't do, or any question they can't answer.

"Robot Services aims at putting at least one into every home eventually. They can cook the perfect dinner, serve it, reply to questions, and accept orders for immediate or later action. They have no individual brains, of course. They have eyes that see electronically and ears that hear in the same way. There is even a rudimentary sense of touch built into their finger ends. A tactile sense that, like the other senses, transmits a train of impulses on an individual frequency, which is picked up by C.H.E.R.U.B., their communal brain.

"The brain sorts these out and takes the appropriate action. The robot, in response to the brain's triggering of its relay circuits, lights its master's cigar, answers an abstruse question, or gives the baby its feed. Power comes from the Wesson-cell unit clipped to its back in a canister. Is that clear so far?"

"As plasto-crystal," I said.
"Please continue."

It looked as though these boys had found the perfect slave—servile, intelligent, undemanding. I could see right away why they had sent for old Belov. Oh yes! They knew about my work on the government project HARRI. Now scrapped if they had any common sense. What is the use of an electronic brain that is content to sit and think, but refuses to answer questions? Of course, this might be the same brain with modifications, including some wonderful vocal operative circuits—the dogs!

Simpson went on to explain that CHERUB was a reasoning entity. Some of the answers were built in; but these were the near-reflexes and the walk-stop-avoid actions constantly repeated. Apart from this the brain was a calculated, homeostatic miracle, an imperfect perfection whose imperfections provided the variations and imponderables that made for free will. Well, now they had trouble.

And no wonder. Let me say now that the I.Q. of an electronic brain of this type is infinite, because it is always expanding. First it is a trickle of knowledge that flows into the memory banks, and then a stream, a river, a rushing, tumbling cataract, a sea, a crashing ocean! It would never stop sorting and sifting the facts,

and thinking, thinking, thinking night and day. You can't switch it off because if you do you kill the reasoning half and you are left with a mere computer. Heaven knows what knowledge the thing had acquired and would acquire. It made me dizzy to think of it.

"Who built it?" I asked.

Simpson smiled slyly.

"The best brains in the country have been working on this project," he said. "And we had a great deal of useful information from HARRI. The homeostatic and reflective reasoning instrument now puzzling a certain government department. They seemed scared of it."

"They have need to be," I said.

"Anyway, we had these robots constructed and placed them with three typical families in the middle income group." He took his glasses off and polished the lenses. His hand trembled slightly as he put them on again. "They were efficient enough; but we had trouble right from the start. Take One, for instance. He was placed with a family named Brinker. Just ordinary folk. Seems that Mrs. Brinker asked for the table to be set for tea. Well, that's a straightforward order. There shouldn't have been any difficulty, and there wasn't really.

"In about three minutes the table was set. After the meal the robot sided the things away, and proceeded to wash up, and re-

place the crockery in the cupboard. Only it couldn't. Where to put the crockery? 'In the cupboard,' said Mrs. Brinker. 'No room,' said CHERUB through One, having checked on that fact. Mrs. Brinker looked. She said she nearly had a fit. She found, in fact, that she now had *two* sets of crockery which were identical in every respect; even to a slight chip on one of the saucers."

"Her husband bought her a new set," I suggested. "Or perhaps she was lying."

As old Occam laid it down—never magnify entities beyond necessity. In other words, don't accept an outre explanation when a simple one fits the facts.

Simpson shook his head.

"Yesterday robot Three produced an animal out of thin air for no reason at all, and gave it to a nine-year-old boy, who was trying to carve his initials on the rubberoid arm of the robot."

"It shows a love of children, anyway," I said, smiling. "Out of thin air, eh? What next?"

"Out of thin air. It bit him and ran away. We don't even know what it was; but we do know that the robot was switched off. I can tell you frankly that we have had a team of experts on the problem, and they couldn't crack it. A very odd thing happened while they were here in this room. A shoal of brilliant-coloured fish, some of them very queer fish indeed, came

through that wall there, and went right out the other side. They gave up after that. In fact, they stampeded."

"I'm not surprised," I told him. "Where did I put my hat?"

He put an arm out to detain me.

"No, don't go," he said. "You are our last hope. We thought that perhaps someone with a more—er, empirical approach might succeed where the others with their orthodox, academic standards had failed. Actually, we want someone with a flair for getting results by accident—if you see what I mean."

"I see what you mean all right," I told him coldly. "But this is a problem for a psionics engineer, except that there is no such animal. In any case, my friend, goodbye. I want no truck with such goings on. If you take my advice you will scrap the whole caboodle before something terrible happens."

I know psionic phenomena when I meet it. I once experimented with a Hieronymous rig. I didn't like the results. I decided then and there to leave the extra-dimensional and contiguous worlds for some other pioneer to explore. That kind of courage is not given to every man.

I had my hand on the door knob when Simpson spoke again. It stopped me in my tracks.

"Did I hear you say a thousand pounds?" I asked.

"You heard me say five hundred," said Simpson.

"In advance?"

"I might be able to get you one hundred right away. The rest on completion of job. I'll put it to the directors. Okay?"

What could I do? I was penniless, and beginning to get rather hungry.

"All right," I agreed. "It's a deal. But I don't like it, my friend, I don't like it at all. I'm only doing it because I am poor. If I were rich I'd spit in your eye."

There was a notebook on the bench. I scribbled a few words on it, tore the page off, and handed it to Simpson.

"I shall need these things," I told him.

He glanced at the list and gasped. Then he turned the paper over, as though he expected to find something on the other side. I'm damned if I know what! He turned it back and looked at me in blank amazement.

"This appears to be a three-course meal," he said, as though he doubted the evidence of his own eyes.

"That's right," I assured him. "Followed by a cherry pie. Emilio's cherry pie sparks off the genius in me. There is nothing quite like it this side of Heaven."

He shook his head and went out. While he was away I asked CHERUB a few questions through the robot One.

They were just ordinary run-of-

the-mill questions. The sort of thing any schoolboy might be expected to know. Robot One answered them easily and rapidly with what seemed to me to be a touch of boredom. When I came to the question of psionics, however, it was different. Oh, yes, very different. First it stalled.

"Information still being collated," said One.

"Relate all information you have," I insisted.

I needn't have bothered. The thing had my measure. All I got was a string of mathematical gibberish, which went on and on even after I had told One that I had heard enough. I had to switch him off in the end.

I didn't tackle the problem again until after I had eaten the meal I had ordered. I was sipping my coffee when suddenly the answer came to me in the form of a piece of circuitry. It flashed on my inward eye like pure poetry, vivid and complete. When this happens I feel myself in company with the great ones of the past—Shakespeare, Villon, Keats and Walter Hagen, whose immortal words, casually uttered, bring tears to my eyes whenever I think of them. Walter said: "I don't want to be a millionaire. I just want to live like one."

I have the poetic temperament, you know. Some day I must write a poem. It will topple

governments, and shake the whole world with its wisdom. People will point me out in the street as the author of it. "There goes Hek Belov," they will say. "On his way to gaol—the swine!"

But, as I said, I had the answer. A variation brake. A bleeder chain that exactly matched the leakage from the main, action circuit. Of opposite potential it would be fed back to cancel out any excessive variations and the whole thing was controlled by two valves working in opposite phase. It would bring CHERUB's thought-action process down to a manageable level.

I started in on the rig; but I had hardly begun to wire it when the whole thing, components, wire, tools, everything, was whipped up in front of my eyes, scrunched into a shapeless lump and dropped back on the bench. With forces like that around Belov doesn't stay.

I managed to open the door without turning the knob, and went in search of Simpson. One thing I had noted, though, as CHERUB demonstrated his psionic muscles. Out of the corner of my eye I had seen the current meter swing almost full scale and that was the give-away. I had the thing taped.

"What do you think we should do now?" asked Simpson, looking up from the blueprint he had been

mulling over. "And what's that in your hand?"

"A door knob," I said. "And part of a lock." I placed them on his desk and leant across. "I'll tell you what we should do, my friend. We should destroy CHERUB before it gets completely out of hand. It's a monster! On consideration I will have nothing further to do with it. I could fix it, even now—like that!" I snapped my fingers. "But I will not. I am contracting out."

"You can't contract out," said Simpson. "We had to pay your creditors off. They found out where you were and were threatening to have you arrested."

"How much of the five hundred is left?" I asked. I felt quite ill. "A hundred pounds? Fifty? No?"

"Ten," he smiled. "You are forgetting income tax, which is deducted at the source. Here."

I snatched the note.

"If you can fix it," grinned Simpson, "perhaps you had better do just that. You owe Robot Services five hundred pounds, Mr. Belov."

There was nothing else for it. I constructed two voltage stabilisers. One was for the Wesson-cell emergency supply, and the other was for the public power line. Psionic variations could be treated as variation in current. If it couldn't get the juice it couldn't

perform above a certain level. The more bizarre its antics the more current it would pull. All it could do with the stabilisers in would be to think about it.

The Wesson-cell emergency supply was situated in a room to the rear of the brain's main panel and that is where the public supply entered, too. A failure in the public supply would automatically switch the brain over to the Wesson-cells, otherwise the reasoning half would cease to function. I intended to connect one stabiliser in the public supply first. The other way round, given a power-station failure, and out would go CHERUB.

Simpson came with me and without any hesitation I switched off the main supply. This left CHERUB on emergency. I cut the power lead, and started to connect one of the stabilisers. Immediately it began to get dark inside the room. The lights were obscured. I couldn't see Simpson. I flicked my lighter and for an instant I glimpsed him, mouthing speechlessly, and in a great state of funk with his back to the wall. The light vanished then, absorbed by the fog, or whatever it was. CHERUB was on to us.

Simpson shouted that something had hold of him. There was only one thing left to do. I was within easy distance of the main emergency switch and I reached over for it. I have a good memory

for panel layouts and switch rigs and I located it at once. As I flicked it off I felt something grip me; but it was too late. The darkness vanished as the switch opened and CHERUB's grip on me relaxed. At the same time there was a howl of pain as Simpson, who had been suspended somewhere near the ceiling, crashed to the floor. I helped him up.

"Just bruised, I think that's all," he said. And then he looked at the two main switches, both open. "The brain," he said, in a stunned way. "You've switched it off. It's gone."

I nodded.

"Dead," I said. "As dead as mutton—thank Heaven and Hek Belov."

He wasn't a bit grateful.

"What will I tell the directors?" he asked fearfully.

As if I should know.

"Tell them goodbye," I said. "Tell them all the things you've wanted to tell them for years, but daren't because you would have been fired. You'll be fired anyway now—and blackballed—so make the most of it, my friend."

He readjusted his glasses and glared at me.

"Go to hell!" he said viciously.

I was halfway to the door when he called me back.

"Before you go," he told me, "you can get CHERUB functioning again. Bring him back. Resurrect

him. Call it what you like, but get the thing working. Otherwise I'll have you locked up for getting money under false pretences. And don't tell me you're scared, because with those two stabilisers in circuit it can't play any tricks. We'll connect them in first and then you can coax CHERUB back."

"My friend," I told him. "I am very much inclined to punch you right on the whiskers. However, I am a gentleman. I will explain first and then I will punch you. It should be obvious that with the stabilisers in circuit you've had it. I need a mounting voltage and all the current the thing can draw

to the point of damn near burning it out to force that computer to use its variable circuit loops. Do it without, and you are back to where you started. Cha! Let the dead rest! Goodbye! I'll send CHERUB some artificial flowers."

"What the devil for, you lunatic!" he shouted as I went through the door.

"For its artificial soul," I said, popping my head back in and giving him a dirty look.

Damn me if I don't send them!

No one has any right to pay another man's creditors behind his back.

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The Last Old Maid

by JOHN COTTERILL

There will always be people who do not fit into the age in which they live. Life for them could be merely unpleasant—it could also be dangerous.

EARLY MORNING SUNLIGHT flared off glass and metal structure all over the wide city.

From the bedroom window Miss Marlow watched the slumbering metropolis throb systematically into life. At seven-thirty the central siren shrilled in an urgent monotone. The house shook slightly to the rumble of a thousand unleashed turbotrains and plumes of white smoke rose simultaneously from a score of high chimneys. *Seven forty five.* The long distance rockets were captured in brief threads of silver before they died in flakes of fire over the distant hills. *Eight-o'clock.* As though lifted by a gust of wind, a swarm of helicopters

ascended and went spinning away over rooftops like silver sycamore leaves.

"The machine will come today," she whispered excitedly and continued to watch.

The wash of twenty-fifth century bustle penetrated even into Salisbury Place. Driven by hasty hands a few turbine cars emerged from below the stately crumbling houses, bounced noisily through their criticals, steadied, and then purred away eagerly down to the pulsating, metal city.

Those who had time to glimpse her quaint, old-world, unpainted face behind the flowered curtains felt an uneasy pang. Everyone who saw her, like a ghost of the past, loitering leisurely among

the sunflowers or sitting motionless and relaxed in the sun or turning her soft gaze on them, had an unquieting impression of something beautiful lost for ever. She was an anachronism. She didn't belong to the neurotic, feverish, sacrificial age of the omnipotent state. A legal wrangle had enabled her to inherit a small private income; and on this she lived like a dainty lady of the twenty-first century, a static pocket in the headlong torrent of civilization. Awed by her complacency, no one had ever done their duty and reported her. Even the fanatical social scientists in the district respected her right to fade away gracefully, together with her marble-facaded house, into antiquity.

Her natural rose-tinted cheeks flushed a deeper red with anticipation when the green van drew up outside. With precise, speedy efficiency the side opened and a small trolley trundled along the drive bearing the machine.

"Look, Fluff! Look, it comes!"

At first glance she decided it was everything a machine should be, a simple black and silver cube with no complex projections or attachments.

"Do you see, Fluff? Isn't it beautiful?" The tiny, animate ball of fur in her arms, the end product of centuries of diminishing toy poodles, gave one of its senseless little yelps.

Peeping sideways through the curtains she saw her neighbour, Vy, standing listlessly in her glass sun-bay, fingers twitching around the inevitable mescaline cigarette. "My! Doesn't she look terrible in the mornings without her veneer!" said Miss Marlow with satisfaction.

Vy was watching the arrival of the machine with a perplexity that delighted her. She felt like opening the window and shouting: "You see, you're not the only one. Now I've got one, too!"

Instead, she shed her night robe and walked into the cleansing room. The image of the machine, black and silver and bewitching, filled her mind. She hardly noticed the spirals of warm water that licked around her from all sides. She walked on leisurely and currents of warm air brushed away the water like a caressing hand; and before she emerged again into the bedroom a chosen scent sprayed over her glowing body.

A loud banging came from downstairs and finally a distant tinkling of broken glass.

It took only a few unhurried moments to don her day robe, but when she emerged two workmen were already taking the machine up the carrier track at the side of the stairs.

"Couldn't you have waited a

few minutes in the garden?" she asked peevishly.

"Sorry, lady. Can't stop. Must get the job finished."

She followed them, still scolding. "It's such a lovely day, too, and the birds are getting plentiful again. Did you hear them in the bushes? It would do you good to stop and listen. Always rushing! And who's going to pay for the broken glass?"

"Don't worry, the department will pay damages. It's time that's important." Time, slipping underfoot with alarming speed. "We've another thirty of these to instal today."

He was like a bird himself, she thought, with his sharp, impulsive actions. She asked: "*Must* you do them all today?"

There was no reply. Already they were boring, screwing and banging, hopping around the bedroom like neurotic sparrows.

She left them and wandered awhile musingly in a room littered with unused machines and gadgets like a museum. She placed her hand in the mechanical valet for a manicure and withdrew it streaked with dust. They were rarely used. But it was a comfort to have them, a concession to the age she lived in; and a vain attempt to ward off the sneers of her neighbours.

She smiled as she picked up a small box, out of which spindles

and a vernier attachment protruded; she had never discovered a use for it and she was too proud to ask. There were many like that. Her dear sister, when she was alive, had always said: "One day, Sara, you'll be sorry. I don't like it. You never know what you're bringing into the house."

But, of course, nothing ever did happen. Emily was always so fussy. The mechanisms were always nice and harmless even if they were not very useful.

As she went back to the bedroom, where the banging had ceased, she wondered whether she would discover the purpose of her latest acquisition.

"Tell your husband to sign this and return to the sales department," said the bird-like man, thrusting a slip of paper into her hand as he rushed past.

She looked down at the paper, hesitated, and then called after them: "But I haven't got a husband."

The two men froze. They looked first into each other's eyes; then they turned to gaze up the stairs at her and she could see their nostrils twitching as though there were a bad smell in the house.

She wondered what she had said that could make them waste their valuable time.

Still they stood staring.

The bird asked, hesitantly:

"You have a—hmm—a man around the house?"

"Certainly not!" she retorted, shocked at the implication. "I live here alone."

The man wrinkled his brow for a moment in furious thought. And then, like the opening of a safety relay, his efficient unit mind said "refer to higher authority," and the tension discharged. His haste phobia re-asserted itself and he bundled his friend out of the strange house. But as he went through the door he turned, and with one last bird-like nod he shouted: "I hope you know what you're doing, lady."

The door slammed.

Miss Marlow rushed into the bedroom and looked at the machine in an ecstasy of apprehension. It consisted of a cube, of side about fifty centimetres, encased in shiny alloy except for one black plastic side which, on closer inspection, she saw to be faintly serrated like an audiogrill. The only other features were an operating knob and an indicator light. The knob, black and knurled and circumscribed by a graduated scale, was inviting. Her fingers reached out and hovered uncertainly near it.

The man had said: "I hope you know what you're doing."

She switched on, withdrew her hand sharply and jumped back. Minutes passed noiselessly on the

atomic clock; nothing happened. She turned it slowly round to the full scale reading of 120. Still nothing. No noise, no heat. Only the blood-red glare of the indicator light.

Disappointed, she switched off. She would almost have welcomed something horrible. Nothing happened to relive her lonely life. There was never a man lurking beneath her bed, never a corpse in the wardrobe although she searched carefully every night. There was only the dismal emptiness of the rambling old house.

Impulsively, with one last glance at the machine, she fled from it, out into the warmth of the morning sun in the garden.

She found Luke, the gardener, tending the flowers with paternal care.

She watched awhile in silence, breathing the clean air, soothed by the balm of Nature all around her. "I can see six birds in the bushes," she said finally, caressing the smooth petals of a black rose.

"Aye, there were five young uns in one nest this year. They'll be back to normal long before we are." He spoke without looking at her. As he turned away to prune a violet lobelia bush she noticed blood trickling down his sinewy, brown arm.

"Caught it on the pruning hook," he answered in reply to her

startled query. "A few moments ago I felt queer, my attention seemed to wander; the hook slipped." He wiped away the blood casually on his trousers.

Miss Marlow regarded him, as always, with speculative eyes. To her mind they were exactly suited to each other, sharing the bond of being outcasts. They were both defects of the system, tiny flaws on an otherwise perfect casting. Perhaps, somewhere in the Central Record Office, some harassed clerk had lost their identity slips; perhaps a momentary disturbance of the electronic patterns in a computer had erased them for ever from the State's memory. Whatever the reason, they were free.

Sara Marlow thought it a pity that they didn't spend their fortunate freedom together, understanding and comforting each other. It is difficult to stand alone against contemporary thought. But Luke gave and expected nothing. He lived in his small rubble shelter and tended the gardens, making Salisbury Place an oasis of fertility and blazing colour on the fringe of the barren, metal city. He demanded no more than food and a few occasional old clothes in return.

The other inhabitants claimed he was irretrievably insane.

Vy hated him for his complacency and refused him ad-

mittance to her garden, which was laid out in the conventional way, with multicoloured squares of reinforced plastic and metallic fountains.

Vy was there now. But a very different woman from the be-draggled figure of half an hour before. Her figure, tightened by an astringent bath and bound in with elastic fibre, fitted her smart one-piece perfectly. From under long green lashes, her violet-pigmented irises gleamed strikingly and over the artificial roundness of her cheeks diamond dust flashed madly in the sunlight. The overall effect of the cosmetics and metallic hair bindings was an absurd youthfulness; she resembled a schoolgirl dressed up as a pagan goddess in an end-of-term play.

"Want to speak to you, Sara!" she called shrilly, and Miss Marlow reluctantly went across. Reluctant, because Vy was always ready to give a sadistic twist of the knife into her neighbour's old-maid weaknesses. But—one had to be polite to one's neighbours.

"Good morning, Vy. How are you feeling?"

"Terrible."

"Sorry to hear that. And your husband?"

"Worse. His cancer has unsealed again. Still, the doctors say there are years more useful work in him."

"That's fine," said Miss Marlow dryly.

There was a silence. Vy lit another cigarette and watched without interest her two eldest children rolling on the plastic ground. They were aged eight and seven. She had six more. She remarked, casually: "I see you had an electrogex installed today."

Mistaking the concealed curiosity for jealousy, Miss Marlow brightened. "Oh, yes. Did you see it? It's just like the one you have."

Vy looked puzzled. "Are you getting married, Sarah?"

"Good heavens, no!"

Vy was silent and withdrawn as though the subject were not quite nice. When she spoke again she had changed it slightly. "You ought to get married, you know. It's your duty to the State."

Miss Marlow said nothing. She bowed her head meekly and waited for what she knew must come.

"How do you expect to take the advantages of our thriving civilization and give nothing in return?" Her trembling hands flicked at a piece of ash on her coat. "Look at me, eight kids in eight years; and I'm not strong like you. Why should I have to bear them all when people like you . . ."

On and on she raved. Gradually it changed, as always, to a synopsis of Miss Marlow's old-maid habits, and a few broad hints

that she needed a good psyching to make her normal.

Miss Marlow looked at the "normal" person in front of her, seeing her restless, nervous twitching, sensing the torment that racked her mind, even through the mescaline mists.

"Thank you for the suggestion," she answered politely, "but I'd much rather remain as I am."

The machine was still an unknown quantity, destined, most likely, to end like the others, its ingenuity hidden in a blanket of dust.

But gradually it left her mind as the day passed peacefully, walking among the flowers and hearing the birds still trilling their joyful songs to a world which no longer paused to listen. And when she retired to her bedroom at night there were the social history spools, playing eloquently through the concealed speaker.

She listened, as she combed the quiescent poodle, to her favourite tape on which Professor Spalding outlined, in tones of cultured horror, the marriage customs of the twentieth century.

". . . Can only imagine the mental anguish, the frustration, the scenes of emotional squalor which must have existed in that barbarous age before the inception of compatibility pairings. The few

records that escaped destruction lead us to the conclusion that nine tenths of the literature of that era evolved around the natural conflicts arising from such an unsatisfactory state of affairs.

"But perhaps the most astonishing feature was the vast ritual associated with choosing a mate, a procedure which enslaved the thoughts and actions of a woman for the whole of her life. It is self-evident that in such circumstances, not only were women of negligible value to the State as workers, but, more important, they exercised an emasculating restriction upon the energies of their menfolk."

Miss Marlow switched off and sighed, and wrinkled the smoothness of her brow thoughtfully. She just couldn't understand. Admittedly, the age was efficient in the use of manpower. And they were building up their population again, sacrificing themselves for posterity, pushing onwards to the greatest heights of technology—but for what purpose? Surely it was obvious that visions of world conquest were still with the ruling class; that, at least, had not been destroyed when the rocket bombs had descended in a cloud fifty years before, decimating nine tenths of the population. As soon as numbers and science permitted, wouldn't there be the same useless destruction all over again? Was that efficiency?

But perhaps she wasn't clever enough to comprehend! Feeling in a thoughtful mood, she changed the electroluminescent wall lighting to a soft violet. And then she tried the machine again. The indicator light flashed like a blood-red eye. But, as before, nothing happened.

But perhaps something was happening. Gradually, as she lay on the bed, a soft vibration lulled her unconscious; she had a feeling of perception that transcended her normal sensations. She called to something in the darkness; and voiceless and unseen, it answered her.

Dream thoughts sidled through her mind as though drawn by invisible threads.

"I wonder if Roger ever thinks of me up there on Mars. Has he forgotten . . . twenty years is a long time. I was a kid of twenty-one then, just leaving school . . . Perhaps I should have been psyched, like Roger wanted, and gone with him . . . Perhaps I should have taken a useful subject at college instead of social history. Perhaps . . ."

She sat up sharply and shook her head to clear the sad regrets. Hers was a good life. It was the life she would choose again above all others.

Only sometimes— Well, she wished she were not, as the ancients expressed it, a lonely old maid.

She rose and walked over to the machine and switched it slowly to full scale. Yes, there was definitely something. She was suddenly afraid. It was not audible. It was a feeling she could not express, a tingling in the bones perhaps; and yet not even that. She relaxed on the bed again and closed her eyes.

A vivid image possessed her.

On the snow slopes of a hill that rose from the forest a she-wolf crouched motionless under a flood of moonlight staring into the snow-decked pines beneath, awaiting something, knowing of it with a sense that could not be explained in human concepts. In unison with the animal, Miss Marlow could feel the tremulous quivering of her limbs and the prickling neck hair as she saw the dark shapes leaping amongst the black boles of a distant ridge and heard the first sounds borne mournfully down the wind.

There was a crunch outside the window and sounds of metal scraping on marble. The image vanished. Miss Marlow jerked upright in a single, rigid movement.

She turned her fearful eyes on the open window. In the velvet sky a portion of Orion was visible with a low-orbit satellite speeding across it. Fluff strutted regally on the carpet beneath and through the window came the night sounds

from the garden. The scene was beautiful and peaceful.

She saw it as a brief photographic image in the few seconds before a large masculine hand appeared on the window sill.

It was followed by a broad, high-cheeked face that might normally be placid; now it was transformed by the intensity of emotion in the dark eyes, and the trembling of the thick lips.

She waited in vibrant helplessness for him to approach her. She was held in the inevitableness of their attraction, despite the depth of her fear; a fear compounded of all the real and imagined terrors she had ever known.

But the intruder had only just moved into the room when another appeared and grappled with him. She had expected that and felt no surprise when other men arrived. It was all written in the extra dimension of perception. Soon six crazed men were rolling on the floor, punching and kicking, clawing their way towards her and being pulled back by the others. Already one lay still with blood pouring from his broken nose onto the white carpet.

She closed her eyes on the ugly scene—and plunged herself into a worse.

The she-wolf bared her fangs in fear and crouched low against

the silvery slope while six male wolves fought each other in a snarling fury for the right to possess her, slashing with razor-sharp teeth until blood flew in the air, was plastered thick on furry coats and formed dark stains on the trodden snow.

She returned hurriedly from the scene of primitive violence to find the equally terrible present somewhat changed. Now there were three State policemen in the room, and she could hear outside the window the hiss of jets on their hovering plane. She knew instantly that the policemen had themselves succumbed to the insistent primordial urge. They fought the men, and each other, for the same overpowering reason—Miss Marlow.

She knew it with horror. Already one policeman had freed himself and was scrambling towards her. She felt her fragile night robe tearing, ripping away from her paralysed body . . .

The police officer by the window fought against the unheard strains of madness. Seeing the blood-red eye of the machine through the dim violet light, he plunged across to it, stumbling over writhing bodies, fighting off the clutching hands.

He switched it off.

Men congealed into comic positions; they looked at each other, then at the strange room in

bewilderment, fingering their painful abrasions and bleeding knuckles. Like a statue awakening, the policeman poised above Miss Marlow bent his head and looked in astonishment at the piece of cloth in his hand. Then, slowly, with an upsurge of anger, he understood.

He flung the cloth violently into her face.

Miss Marlow collapsed into a whimpering heap. The officer barked orders. The civilians were hustled out by the sheepish policemen before their bewilderment changed to anger.

There was contempt on the officer's face as he stood over the frail body, which was shaking with released terror. A stone splintered the window and violent invectives followed it from the outer darkness. His experienced eyes took in the details of the room, the trampled remains of the poodle, the dolls on the dressing table, the hundred other revealing trinkets of a single woman's room. His expression softened and he thought he understood, and asked: "Why not obtain a husband the normal way?"

There was no reply. "Anyway," he continued, "I shan't take this any further. I think you've learnt your lesson."

Amidst the blood and smashed furniture and the flattened corpse

of Fluff, she lay and whimpered for a long time into the night.

Morning came in its traditional role of healer after the night's pain.

The bloodstains were dark and clotted, the machine was a harmless-looking black and silver box in the warming sunlight. She felt the relief of calm after a raging storm and there was even a gentle swell of pride, on which her ego rocked pleasantly. She thought: Nine men fought for *me* in this very room barely ten hours ago.

She patted her hair into shape, sprayed powder over her cheeks and began to sing lightly.

With the rise in spirits came the thought that Vy, who followed the daily progress reports, would be able to explain the strange happening of the previous night.

On the way through the garden she saw Luke in the distance and a thought that was breathtaking and slightly shocking presented itself. She dismissed it instantly, but still it tingled and fermented unconsciously.

She found Vy sitting before her dressing table, engaged in the delicate process of transforming herself, and told her the whole story. She finished by begging humbly for an explanation. It was the right approach to Vy, who was only too pleased to air her scientific knowledge.

"The electrogrex," she said, "strengthens a sense we once possessed but have lost through neglect. One might relate it to the group mind of lower creatures, the existence of which can be seen in the sudden wheeling of a flock of birds, the purposive action of each separate ant in a colony, the gathering of all tomcats in the neighbourhood around a she-cat at certain opportune times . . ."

"How disgusting!" protested Miss Marlow.

"No scientifically accurate statement is disgusting," said Vy categorically. "Don't be so squeamish, Sara. I gave the last example because the only sympathetic neural vibrations so far detectable in humans is that between male and female when they are biologically and psychologically prepared for mating. The interaction can be picked up and amplified mechanically; that is the purpose of the electrogrex." Her eyes sparkled with conditioned enthusiasm. "Just think, Sara, at last we are on the threshold of psi-faculty!"

Miss Marlow was uninterested. The important point to her was: "Why do people need the machine? Isn't Nature's way good enough?"

"Nature can always ultimately be improved upon," Vy quoted. "The State must have children and most husbands these days,

with their cancers and work-strain, are not very—virile. With my own husband I have to set the dial to strength 60.”

“I had it full scale, 120,” confessed Miss Marlow, half proudly, half ruefully.

“In that case, you most likely had all the males in the city, within the directional sector, jumping about and getting hot under the collar and looking for you . . .”

“How terrible!”

“Yes, you were very lucky to escape alive. After a while they would have found you. After then would have come a lynching party of angry wives. If you’ll take my advice, Sara, send the thing back!” She rubbed cleansing cream over her face for a while in silence and then, with an adroit feminine thrust, added: “Or else keep it and find yourself a husband.”

Miss Marlow flushed. Vy had unwittingly put into words a thought lurking unrecognised in her own mind.

“It would be to your advantage,” continued Vy. “Sooner or later someone will inform on you. I myself feel angry when I see you avoiding your responsibilities, while I have to bear these brats for the State’s gun fodder.”

“Then why do you?”

“Because otherwise I should be a social outcast. A recluse like

you wouldn’t know just what that means. State propaganda has caused most social groups to refuse admittance to anyone falling below the average of one child a year. And I must have entertainment, something to do, or I’d go crazy!” She lit another mescaline cigarette from the stub of the last and drew deeply on the entrancing vapour. “What annoys me is the waste of effort. We cannot possibly hope to keep pace with Asia’s baby factories. Before long we shall have to introduce them ourselves.”

“Never!” exclaimed Miss Marlow with unusual fire. “No God-fearing state would ever allow it!”

“You’re too naive and old-fashioned, Sara. And anyway, you don’t have to bear them. Look at me!” Her voice lifted to a shriek of self-pity. “I’m worn out!” And that was certainly true. Miss Marlow could see the bulging waist that astringents failed to hold, and the cheeks that, without their padding and veneer, sagged in hollows of pallid flesh.

But Vy did not remain in the low level of humility for long. She recovered herself with a few words that spat like drops of poison from her lips. “Of course, there *is* a great psychological satisfaction in having a husband and children.”

Back in her own bedroom, Miss Marlow was not feeling as de-

pressed as her clashes with Vy usually left her.

Her plan had crystallised into consciousness with beautiful clarity.

She tidied the room and carefully took up the mutilated poodle. "Poor Fluff," she whispered, caressing the bedraggled fur against her cheek. She had lost her only companion. It gave to her scheme the final touch of desperation.

She walked over to the smashed window. Outside, the soil steamed after a light shower. Luke worked steadily, restoring the trampled flower beds, shaking sparkling droplets from the bushes and tall sun plants. She said aloud: "Poor Luke. You'll hate losing your freedom. But I'll look after you well."

She turned on the electrogrex. Taking no chances, she set the dial at 1.

And she could afford to wait. She switched on her history tape and listened while she looked out for the first signs of awareness in Luke.

"In the system I have described," said the cultured voice, "it was inevitable that a considerable part of a woman's pre-marital existence should be concerned with familiarising herself in methods of ensnaring the male of her choice.

"For a full account of the infinitely varied methods used, reference should be made to the fourth spool of Parkinson's 'Romance and Ritual.' I can only mention here the most widely used and effective persuasal, the withholding of her physical charms until after the marriage contract had been established . . ."

Luke had begun to fidget and mooch aimlessly through the garden. Frightened he would go away, she turned the pointer over the dial to strength 10. Then, from a drawer, she took a bunch of State forms and began to sort through them; forms to leave the vicinity, to report progress in one's occupation, to submit an annual declaration of possessions . . . and, finally, what she was seeking—a marriage contract. She put her signature to it.

All it required to make the contract legal was Luke's.

In the garden he wandered in circles under the influence of opposing forces. His independence urged him to leave, but always the odd, jangling vibration pulled him back. His circles diminished and he neared the ladder lying beneath the window amidst the crushed dahlias.

Miss Marlow smiled down on him like a young maiden, coyly and fondly.

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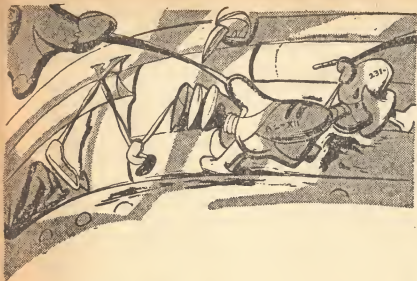
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My Name is MACNAMARA

by ROBERT PRESSLIE

Something was terribly wrong with Macnamara. He woke with a strange wife, stranger talents and no idea how he had come by either. Then he discovered that his name was really something.

Illustrated by Adash

I WOKE WITH BELLS IN MY HEAD and my mouth full of cobwebs. A tentative twist of the neck told me the bells were the pulses of a pressor headache. In the vernacular, I had a large economy-size hangover. I gave the morning air a chance to cool my fevered eyes and discovered that the cobwebs were the loose ends of the blondest hair I could ever remember seeing. The hair was attached to a piece of pale pink curled-up sculpture.

The bells were getting a bit muffled as consciousness crept in. I got reckless and tried thinking. I should have known better. All I could remember, and I wasn't too sure about any of it, was that as far as I knew I was unmarried—unless alcohol had made an honest man of me the night before.

The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that the girl was a complete stranger. And my head was clearing far too fast for a hangover. I sneaked a look at the hand lying across the coverlet. The regulation band of gold was there. The situation seemed legal—as far as that went. But if I hadn't been drunk, how did I get around to marrying the blonde without remembering it? Somebody had done something illegal and it wasn't me, as sure as my name was—

"Timothy Macnamara! You've been awake five minutes and you haven't kissed me yet."

Now that was funny. As soon as she said my name I knew she had it right, but I also had a suspicion that if she hadn't said my name I would have been stuck to find it myself.

She turned towards me, showing a lot of pink. I closed my eyes like a gentleman, and got a dig in the ribs for reward.

"Psst! Wakey-wakey. It's back to work today. The honeymoon's over."

Honeymoon! I was learning. Maybe if I let her talk long enough I would learn more. On the other hand, I wasn't sure I could make the right responses. Until I got myself orientated, my best bet was to keep her quiet. There was only one way to do that without violence. She seemed to like it.

Three hours later, things were a whole lot clearer. We had driven hard and fast from the coast and hit the metropolis before eleven. Under the cover of a headache and the need for concentration on the road, I managed to do some quiet thinking. I came to the conclusion that I was a sap. Because everything was above board. I recognised the car, the road back to town, the by-pass running out to the factory, the factory itself. Just because I had awakened with an addled brain I had imagined myself the victim of a crazy joke. But everything was normal.

Everything except Sherry. I still couldn't remember marrying her a

fortnight earlier. I couldn't remember one second of the fortnight we had spent together on the coast.

I slipped out of the car, closed the door and leaned through the window. "Will you pick me up for lunch?" I asked.

She made big eyes at me. "Come off it, Tim. You know we never go further than the canteen."

"We?"

"Timothy——" Her voice was a little strained. Then she brightened. "I'm the lass with the notebook, the taker-down of the wise man's words of wisdom. Remember?"

I got the impression that she thought I was dragging out a comedy act that hadn't been very funny in the first place, and she was being the understanding wife who was determined to play it her old man's way until he came to his senses.

"So you are now!" I said, sticking to the script. "How could I have forgotten?"

We parted at the cloakrooms. I found the locker with my name on it without even trying. I went unerringly to my own office, the one with PROGRAMME DIRECTOR picked out in gold foil on the frosted glass panel of the door. I skimmed through the papers on my desk and quickly sorted them into order of priority. The topmost sheet said they needed me most in the Insulation Division. I knew where that was, too—eighth floor up in the west wing.

Details were coming back to me progressively. As soon as I did one thing, I knew the next step. It was like reading a familiar verse; given one line, you can recall the next from memory without any prompting.

Squires was near to having a baby. He welcomed me like an annual bonus. I wasn't surprised. Squires was in a mess. The length and breadth of his whole department was filled with spindly machines that clicked and clacked worse than a knitting contest.

"What project are you on?" I asked.

"Insulators." That was the bovine kind of remark so typical of Squires. We were in the Insulation Division of which Squires was production foreman and he tells me they were making insulators. I let it pass. But he saw me shut my eyes in a slow, patient blink.

He went on: "This one came up this morning, top urgent. You weren't in, so I had to work out my own programme. It doesn't look good, but it's the best I could do. I don't think it can be done any other way."

He was practically slapping my face with a glove. I noted the thinly-veiled challenge. I let that pass, too. I remembered that they all did it, every single production foreman in the organisation. Just because they were specialists they

gave themselves ulcers because they had to take orders from a jack-of-all-trades like me. They failed to recognise that I was a specialist, too, a specialist in diversity. My particular talent was the ability to get straight to the heart of a job. Unlike the specialists, I had no preconceived notions to hinder me and tell me something could not be done in a certain way.

Klein Komponenten was a big organisation. If a thing was electrical—even if only remotely connected with electricity—we made it. We were not only big, we were the biggest. There wasn't a major company in the world that we didn't work for, and there were few governments that we could not count as customers. Because of our versatility it followed that we were the first port of call if anybody was in trouble; if they wanted an entirely new component or device, they knew KK could make it. And after old Henry Klein himself I was the first man to study the requirements and the specifications, because it was my job to look at the order and plan the layout which would produce the desired component most efficiently and most economically.

Squires' attempt to go it alone was pathetic. From one of his spindly machines I plucked a couple of pieces of plastic, milk-white stuff, light as latex foam. Both pieces had been rotating in the centre of a cluster of probing

needles. One set of needles was fitted with hard cutting points.

I held out one of the bits of plastic. "This, I suppose, is the prototype?"

"Hand carved," Squires said. "We've got the tracing needles mechanically linked to a duplicate set of carving needles." That much was obvious, but I let him continue. "The production time is down to fifteen minutes per unit."

"How big is the order?" I asked.

"Ten thousand."

"And the delivery date?"

"One month."

"And the budget?"

"I don't know about that."

"Neither do I, Squires. But I know this; if H.K. learns that a penny plastic component is being turned out mechanically one at a time, and at a third of the production schedule, then Insulation Division is going to be cleaned out more thoroughly than the Aegean stables."

Poor Squires. He was dithering between the comfort of having me back again to lean on and the gall of having to ask me to take over. He offered a token blow in defence.

"Take another look at the prototype, Mac. It may be little and it may be worth only a penny, but look at the intricacy of the pattern. It's almost as bad as those Chinese things where three balls are carved inside each other."

"Then why in the name of Henry

Klein don't you do the obvious thing? Why don't you mould them? The boys in Engineering could make you a set of dies in a week and the whole batch could be moulded in another week."

He must have been waiting for the question. I guessed that from his smirk. He tapped the insulator in my hand.

"That," he said. "That is deltathene. It doesn't mould."

Automatically, I snapped over my shoulder: "Get me Plastics." It came out like that, sharp and peremptory, born of habit. Without turning my head, I waited to see who would answer. My premonition was right.

"Yes, Mac," she said. She uncradled the phone and flicked the appropriate switch on the PBX with one hand. The other hand held a spiral-bound notebook and a pencil blossomed in her blonde tresses. The open page of the book was covered in squiggles. Somehow I was certain she could have read the squiggles and given me a verbatim report of my joust with Squires. This was secretaryship to the nth degree of perfection, unobtrusive and impersonal—I hadn't missed the implications of the "Mac." My name was Macnamara, Timothy to the girl in privacy and Mac to my associates at work. I had one thing to be thankful for; Sherry wasn't going to allow our new relationship to

interfere with her efficiency as my secretary.

She handed me the phone and plucked the pencil from her hair.

"Apst?" I said. "Mac here. I'm at Insulation. About this project... what? I see, Squires has been at you already. He tells me this deltathene won't mould. Is that right?"

"Perfectly. It has some of the physical characteristics of wood. You can't press it into intricate forms, you can only carve it into shape."

"Why don't we use some other plastic?"

"We're on a tightrope. The specifications of the project call for minimum weight and maximum dee-cee, dielectric constant to you, Mac. I can supply you with plastics which are light enough and others with the specified dee-cee. But deltathene is the only one to satisfy both requirements."

The specifications seemed tight, and in view of the size of the order, a little unusual. I asked Apst who our customer was. After a preamble about it not being his project in the first place and Squires should have told me, he got around to answering my question.

"Celestine Aero Traction," he said.

The name didn't register. I

tried: "They make planes, don't they?" It wasn't a long shot.

"Not now," said Apst. "Last I heard, they were doing met satellites. Small fixed-orbit jobs with conventional rocket launching. Nothing that would call for ten thousand insulators."

His last sentence had forestalled a question I was framing. I asked another. "What could they be building that *would* require insulators like these?"

He passed it back to me. "Surely that's more your line than mine."

"Just the opposite," I denied. "My job is to look at a project and break it down into simple operations. I don't make any claims to being able to do it in reverse. I'm no psychometrist. I can't look at the components and imagine the whole. Doesn't the specified deecie tell you anything?"

"Well——" He sounded warmer. It wasn't often anyone gave Apst the opportunity to air an opinion. "Well," he repeated, "if it wasn't so ridiculous, considering Celestine's facilities, I would guess they had beaten all the bigger firms and designed an atom-powered spaceship. Work it out for yourself, Mac. The insulators are a centimetre long, they weight practically nothing, yet they could take a bolt of lightning without breaking down. Indeed, I would elaborate on my

guess and say they had devised a method of getting enough electrical power from a reactor to give a spaceship ion-drive!"

Apst was too good a scientist to be far off the beam. I gave his guess a six-to-four chance of being correct, in which case it just wouldn't do for Klein Komponenten to fall down on the job of producing the insulators.

"Send me across a data sheet on this deltathene," I said. "And don't write down to me. I went to school, too. Give me all the facts."

Deltathene turned out to be the most peculiar of a whole family of peculiar plastics. The head of the family was alphathene, the lowest non-gaseous polymer of the basic molecule. Alphathene was a liquid, the craziest one I had ever met. It bounced. Tip some alphathene on the deck and it splashes into globules that bounce around the room for hours and drive you mad trying to catch them.

Betathene was the next polymer in the series. It was a solid—of a kind. When hit with a hammer, the hammer bounces right back. But leave the betathene alone for a day and it flows into the shape of its container, or if it is left on a table it just flows until it can't get any flatter—like an effigy in a fire at the waxworks.

I was disappointed with the third polymer. It was normal. Its characteristics could have been those of the familiar household

polythene. Not unexpectedly it was called gammathene. It was a tough, durable plastic with one unfortunate defect. It depolymerised above normal room temperatures, a defect which signposted why it had never usurped the position of the more reliable polythene. But it was important because it was the father of deltathene.

Given the right conditions, molecules of gammathene became cross-linked until the ultimate product was one massive stable molecule. That was deltathene, lighter than lithium and tougher than titanium. Hit deltathene with a hammer and the only predictable result is a broken wrist. The right conditions for its production were showers of hard radiation. That was nothing new. Cross-linked polymers had been produced by radiation since the fifties.

The solution to producing Celestine's insulators seemed so obvious that I felt there must be a catch. Apst's laboratory was the place for learning the truth.

"Tell me if I've got it right," I said to Apst. "This waxy stuff in my hand is gammathene. It's solid and polymerises to deltathene if irradiated. Right?"

"I put that on the data sheet."

"Quite. Now be patient, Apst. I'm not a plastics chemist. But it seems to me we could make those insulators by moulding, using gammathene and then shooting hard stuff at the mouldings to

convert them to deltathene. That's how it seems to me, yet you must have considered the same possibility when Squires contacted you earlier. Where's the catch?"

Give Apst his due, he had a golden opportunity to take me down a peg and blind me with science, yet he refrained. At the same time, he probably refrained only because I was the boy who finally had to carry the baby and he was looking forward to the greater pleasure of seeing me go to H.K. to admit that I couldn't programme a simple project.

He said: "That's how it would seem to anyone without special knowledge of plastics. Squires had the same notion. But what he and you both forgot was the speed at which gammathene depolymerises. Unless it was retained in the moulds it would degenerate to betathene and lose shape before any radiation had affected it. And to irradiate the insulators while still in the moulds would take longer than Squires' mechanical set-up."

Going down in the elevator, I was thinking of nothing but the wrath of Henry Klein and what credentials I had to offer when I went looking for a new job. Then my ever-present, ever-loving, still on my tail with her notebook, said: "Couldn't you do it by irradiating blocks of gammathene and dissolving away the parts that weren't polymerised?"

Like that, it was a stupid remark. It was like saying to Mister Stephenson of steam-engine fame: "Why don't you instal an internal combustion motor?"—without also explaining to the poor man such details as carburettors, compression ratios and also the fact that gasoline had yet to be discovered. But Sherry's remark didn't strike me as stupid; it was the key to a door through which I saw the answer to my problem. I gave her a hug, a kiss and a shower of instructions to be radiated to the respective departments.

The result was a beautiful piece of programming and we had Celestine Aero Traction's order for ten thousand insulators made, packed and despatched in a week. And I still had my job.

Basically, the set-up did what Sherry had suggested. The insulators were formed within blocks of gammathene by hard radiation. The *modus operandi* was more elaborate. It had a kinship with Squires' copying machines. From our Electronics Division I got scanning tubes arranged in sets of three. A prototype insulator was traced three-dimensionally by the tubes, the image was transferred to another set of tubes—highvac, short-ray types—and these etched the image in a block of gammathene. In ninety seconds the block had a core of indestructible delta-thene in the exact shape of the

prototype. The surplus gammathene was not dissolved away; we put the irradiated plastic into a hot-air oven. The gammathene broke down to betathene and then to alphathene, which simply dripped away and left the delta-thene insulator clean and dry and fabricated precisely to an angstrom.

With twelve sets of duplicators we had the job finished in a week.

The last thing I expected was to be carpeted. In the few days after the completion of Celestine's order I had forgotten the trouble it had given and immersed myself in the rest of the backlog of work on my desk. I had everything cleared and had got to the point where I thought I could sit back for a while when I got the buzz from upstairs. Top floor.

I guessed immediately it was the carpet for me. Henry Klein seldom requested your presence for anything else.

He bossed the whole outfit from an ancient horse-hair armchair in a tiny room on the top floor and I doubt if he ever lifted one of his fat little fingers in the vaguest simulation of work. He couldn't have passed an eleven-plus kids' test on elementary science.

Yet I liked old H.K. He had no need to be a boffin. Every man to his own job was his creed and he carried it to the limit. If he decided that Klein Komponenten used

enough of any particular material to make it worth while for the company to manufacture it itself, then he hired the best technicians in that particular field, placed them in charge of the best appropriate expert, paid everybody concerned well over the odds and let them get on with it. The only times he interfered was when somebody had boobed; which usually could be interpreted as meaning that somebody had overstepped the economic boundaries laid down by Henry Klein.

When the call comes and the victim stands waiting for the chopper, he isn't deliberately kept standing. Klein just has the one chair in his office and he occupies it. I felt all legs and length and too many hands when I went into his room.

"You did a good programme on those insulators," he opened.

That was unexpected, and a bad omen. He never told you in words when he was pleased; he left that to the bonus in your envelope. I got the muscles of my face ready for the shock. At least he wasn't going to see what I felt.

"Too good!" he qualified. He squirmed his avoirdupois into a new position. He was too fat ever to be really comfortable in a chair.

"Far too good," he repeated. "Where did you get the idea?"

As yet, I couldn't see where he was leading. I answered the ques-

tion straight, told him the layout was based on Squires' one but adapted by contributions from Apst in Plastics and Hanappier in Electronics.

Klein jerked his head with a silent hiccup. It was his way of grunting. "All neatly tied together by Timothy Macnamara. I'll ask you again. Who gave you the idea?"

Who, this time, not where. I missed the implications for a moment. He was digging at me and I was casting around for something to defend myself with. Then I remembered that his was not the only company in the world.

"If you have anything to say, H.K., come out with it. The project was in a mess when I took over and I think I did a pretty good job in clearing it up."

"Did I say different?" he asked. "Let me put it this way; as far as the contract goes, I'm perfectly satisfied with the fulfilling of it. All right? Now let me say my piece once more. You've always been a good programme director; you wouldn't be here otherwise. But there is something about the way you did this job that smells."

"Give me a for instance." My tone was just to let him know I was still rattled.

"Bluntly?"

"Blunt as you like."

"You're not that good!" He changed position again. "Your

work up till now has been devising, using existing plant or modifying it to tool a project through. Pretty clever stuff most times, but not this clever. This wasn't only devising, it was inventing. And, with all due respects, you haven't the qualifications for inventing. You are not a scientist, only a planner. As I said, you are good, but this job was right out of your class."

He hadn't called me to the inner sanctum simply to keep my head from swelling. He had something on his mind, something he hadn't touched on yet. I felt I was entitled to know what. I said as much.

"Do you know Barsac Radio?" he asked.

"Only that we've done work for them and they used to do some for us before you inaugurated Electronics Division. Why?"

"A man was killed there yesterday. He was their research chief. Apparently, instead of delegating work like a good chief, he had been experimenting on his own. Barsac is a friend of mine. He tells me that Lincoln, the research man, had excelled himself beyond his customary brilliance. The result of his experiments was a radio transmitter—it might have been radar or schmadar. I don't profess to know about these things—anyhow, I gather that this transmitter works on a frequency that nobody ever thought of using before, or if they thought of it they also thought it couldn't be used, and the transmitter is so powerful

it could send signals all the way to God and back."

I was going to ask what this had to do with me but he waved me down.

"I'm not finished," he said. "Apart from sheer power, the transmitter has other virtues. It completely ignores the speed of light; perhaps you understand the significance of that—I don't. Furthermore, its signals are not sprayed wastefully into space. They can be beamed onto the point of a pin. Maybe not quite that, but Barsac mentioned an example. He said a square inch at the distance of the Moon. But the trouble is we've got nobody on the Moon yet to receive any signals. And the instrument is so powerful that it can't be adapted for any Earthly use. In fact, it doesn't work at all without a whole city's supply fed to the terminals. And that is how Lincoln was killed. He tried to harness that much power once too often. His workshop went up in a flash of lightning. He didn't have time to get out."

A pregnant silence was apparently called for and I let it be that way. Klein would break it when he thought I had meditated sufficiently and was ready for more. He did.

"This is a business," he said. "I run it for profit. That profit pays your salary. Now maybe the insulator job was a freak, maybe it won't happen again. I don't want

it to. Stick to doing things the way you used to. If you feel any genius coming on, contact me before you go any further with the project in hand. I don't want anything built that is going to go up in smoke and leave a big red figure on the company's balance sheet."

So that was it. I might have guessed. He was worried about his love, his life's blood—money. Because of an accident at the other side of town with an advanced piece of apparatus and because, by a coincidence, I had been cleverer than usual at the same time, he was worried. I relaxed.

Then, when I thought he was ready to let me leave and get back to work, he threw another question and I was all tight inside again. It was a variation of his first question.

"Was that how it happened, Mac? Co-operation between departments? I mean, you haven't met any strangers lately, anybody who could have put the idea into your head?"

It was just as well I had my face under control. Sure, I had met a stranger. But you don't tell somebody your own wife is a stranger. I managed a laugh to show how ridiculous the question was.

"Nothing like that," I said. "Departmental co-operation, that was all. Did this Lincoln meet any strangers, is that why you ask?"

"Not that I know of."

"Well——?"

"A hunch. A funny hunch I have. I don't even know what the hunch is. But I have this funny feeling something queer is going on."

Henry Klein's hunches were notorious. He had built the business on them. He seemed to have an uncanny knowledge of precisely when there would be a demand in the market for some special product. I respected his hunches and feared this one. I had reason to fear it. I knew more than he did.

"Of course," I said, "I'm a newly married man. What about Sherry?" I was banking on the old adages about attack being the best form of defence, taking the bull by the horns and stuff like that. It paid off.

"Sherry? She's like you, Mac. Part of the furniture."

I dared a little more. "As a matter of fact she did make a suggestion about——"

"Forget it, forget it. I'm sorry I made so much of the insulators. Don't worry about it. I wouldn't want you suspecting things about your wife. Anyhow, it wouldn't be her. She has been with the firm as long as you have."

I had to know the rest. "That's right," I said. "Must be getting on for . . . how long would you say?"

"Six, seven years. I don't remember exactly. Long enough for me to trust you both. Just don't forget my hunch. Look out for strangers."

The next few days were as full as any man can make them. I worked round the clock; three times round. It gave me a good excuse for avoiding Sherry. I copied Lincoln, late of Barsac Radio. I locked myself in my office with sandwiches, vacuum jugs of coffee and a replica of the set-up used for the deltathene insulators. Then I sat and looked at the set-up, looked at it and thought about it while the hands of the clock made their first round.

Under my own steam I ought to have achieved nothing but blood-shot eyes. I achieved a lot more and became convinced that Henry Klein's hunches were out of this world. Because I saw the simple adaptation that completely changed the function of the set-up. And, according to Klein, I hadn't the wit to do such things under my own steam—but only under some outside influence. I didn't care to think whose.

Looking at the set-up, I saw it was wrong. Then I saw where it was wrong, and finally how to put it right. A little re-wiring, changing over components here and there; adjusting the load in various parts of the circuit; and the set-up looked right, the way it should.

Its function was quite different. I put an insulator in the scanning zone, nothing in the duplicating zone and thumbed the switches. In a blink, in just no time at all, the insulator was missing from its former position and was standing

where its kind used to be duplicated. It was the same insulator. I had marked it. The moment had come for reclassification. The duplicating zone was now a receiving zone. The set-up could transmit and receive matter.

There are times when you start something and *must* go on to the end without stopping. It can be a book you are reading or a job of work. I wished my compulsion had been to read; fiction can be so cosy. But I had set foot on a strange road that I was determined to follow until I reached the place the road led to.

The next step on the road was to contact Barsac Radio. I asked for Lincoln and was given the sad news of his demise. Had he any relatives? A wife, they told me. I was an old pal of Lincoln; where could I get in touch with his widow to convey my sympathies? Hold the line, she works here, we'll get her, what's your name?

I said she wouldn't recognise the name as we had never met. Would it be all right if I came across to the factory? By all means, I was told.

Her appearance made me feel a whole lot better. She wasn't young, tall, slender and blonde. She was on the wrong side of forty, dumpy, her grey-shot hair in a mannish crop. I gave her my name and the tale about knowing her husband. I qualified it by saying I was sure it

was the same Lincoln but did she have a photograph I could look at? She had. He was as old as she was. My fears were back. The next question would tell whether they were justified.

"That's him," I said. "But I didn't know he was married?"

"We had only been married three weeks when——" Her voice tailed off.

Three weeks. Just like Sherry and me. I was young and woke one morning to find myself with a young wife. Lincoln had got married about the same time. His wife suited him like mine did. I wondered if he had opened his eyes in surprise three weeks ago.

"Do you help him in his work?" I asked.

"I was his secretary. He liked full notes to be taken of everything he said."

"Do you have notes concerning his latest work? The last time I saw him we discovered we were working along the same lines. It would be very helpful if I could see his notes."

Surprisingly, she agreed. "You might as well have them as the company, and they are no use to me. I never want to see them again."

When I left, I not only had the notes, but a complete circuit diagram of Lincoln's transmitter. I parked my car at a convenient spot and caught a country-service bus. Celestine Aero Traction was

the next port of call. Their place was thirty miles out of town. I got through most of Lincoln's notes on the way.

Celestine did mostly government work. They weren't too keen about letting me though the gate. And when I had talked myself that far, I had to go through the whole spiel again to reach my opposite number, Celestine's programme director.

Even he wasn't exactly cordial. He tried to hide it well enough with his how did I do and how were things at Klein Komponenten, but the starch still showed.

"About those insulators," I said. "Were they satisfactory?"

"Perfectly."

"No rejects or breakages?"

"No rejects or breakages. Come to the point, Mac. What do you want?"

"I'm not trying to high-jack any of Celestine's business if that's what you think. All I want to know is who is in charge of the department that requisitioned the insulators."

He came into the open and dropped the veneer of politeness. "You're a sneaking thief, Macnamara. Go find your own men instead of trying to steal mine."

"You've got it wrong. I can't tell you why——" I dropped the line there in favour of a sudden inspiration. "Tell me," I said.

"This fellow who specified the insulators, didn't he get married three weeks ago? On the thirteenth? To his secretary?"

It was a long shot and it paid big dividends. He said I was right on all three counts, and from there it was easy to make him believe I had come to see the insulator man about personal and not business affairs.

"You want Donovan, over in Atomics. It's a new division we set up recently for government work. I can't go into details about it. I'll check you in myself or they won't let you pass the first guard."

Donovan was about my own age. He was alone in the concrete building except for a brunette about Sherry's age. With voluble eyes and silent lips I motioned that I wanted to see him alone. He asked his secretarial wife to leave us. I used the time they lingered at the door to marshal my thoughts.

He had never seen me before and it was only natural he would have a lot of questions to ask about who I was, what I wanted and why I had come to him. There were two ways to keep him quiet. I could shock him into forgetting his questions or I could answer them before they were asked. I used both methods.

"Nice girl," I said. "I wonder where she came from. I wonder if you know that you never set eyes on her before your marriage three weeks ago."

His belligerence was understandable. I quenched it before he crossed the room. "I never saw mine, either. I was married on the thirteenth like you. I know another man with the same history. He's dead."

Donovan was stopped, but thoroughly. Whatever he was thinking kept him too busy to talk. He was going to be a lot more stunned yet.

"Before I met Sherry—that's my wife—I was a competent but not exceptionally brilliant programme director for Klein Komponenten. Within a few hours of getting back to work after the honeymoon I turned out a job that was more than brilliant. I'm talking about the insulators you ordered. The man who died went one better; he invented a tight-beam transmitter which is so advanced that there is no use for it yet. Your ion rocket is in the same class."

He was puzzled. "Which ion rocket?"

"Isn't that what you wanted the deltathene insulators for?"

"No, you've got it wrong. This was a thing of my own, so I don't suppose anybody would object to my telling you about it." He crossed the floor and laid a hand on an oblong metal casing about the size of a television receiver. "You're looking at the most powerful electrical generator ever made. It is also the smallest atomic reactor."

"Who gave you the idea?"

Donovan bristled. "I don't like the things you say, fellow. This baby is all my own."

"Really? I take it that up to three weeks ago you designed rocket motors—you don't have to answer that one. I'm not after government secrets. But I'm saying that you designed that generator after you were married. I'm willing to bet you didn't have a glimmer of the idea before then. Am I right?"

"What if you are? It so happens I woke with the whole thing born in its entirety in my head—yes, even to the correct insulators. I telephoned your firm the specifications from the hotel before we left for home."

"Just like that!" I sneered. "You dreamed up the whole thing! How could you, man? It wasn't even directly in your field of work. As my boss told me, this is out of your class."

"I'll tell you something. I'm going to see that you never get through Celestine's gates again. All this crazy talk!"

I looked him squarely in the eyes. "You don't know how crazy. Three of us, you, me and Lincoln, get married on the same day, all to our secretaries, and each of us produces a phenomenally advanced piece of apparatus immediately afterwards. Lincoln made a transmitter that could

broadcast a tight beam to a star. You make a generator that fits Lincoln's transmitter perfectly, because the transmitter needs unlimited power to make it function and your generator can supply it. My contribution is a——"

Donovan jumped with astonishment at the yelp I let out. His amazement was nothing to mine. I had found a key piece of the jigsaw. I sat down.

"When I came to see you," I said, "I had a problem. I also had a nebulous theory which I thought you might be able to confirm. The theory was correct. Out of the set-up which I devised for turning out your insulators, I made a machine which can send and transmit matter. The tie-up is perfect. With my apparatus coupled to Lincoln's tight-beam transmitter and powered by your generator—don't you see—the complete arrangement could send things into space, out to a star planet, almost instantaneously."

"Or receive them," said Donovan quietly. He was beginning to see things my way.

"Exactly. The three discoveries were meant for each other. In fact, we didn't invent three separate machines, but three components of the same machine, a machine that can have only one purpose. Which confirms my fears completely. We have been used, you, me and Lincoln."

Donovan wasn't dim. "By some-

one from a star planet," he said. "Aliens!"

I got to cases. "By our wives," I said.

We argued it over for an hour. Donovan could see no way to disprove my statement, yet he refused to accept it. He didn't awaken with a headache three weeks earlier. He maintained steadfastly that he had known his wife for years. The circumstantial evidence was damning; the coincidence of dates, wives' occupations and our own sudden brilliance; Donovan still wouldn't have it.

He said: "My wife has worked here as long as I have. How do you explain that? If our wives are aliens, how have they managed to escape notice for so long and why have they lain low until now?"

That had worried me, too, but I thought I had the answer. "They didn't appear on this Earth until the day we were married. The rest is illusion, a tremendously thorough illusion. Everybody thinks the girls have been around for years. They think that because they have been made to think it. From the boss down to the most junior employee they are convinced of the girls' pre-existence, even to the extent of remembering how long they have been employed at the works, what their jobs were and who they were

attached to. The same impression was made on us. But with me it didn't quite take. I *knew* I hadn't seen Sherry before."

Donovan wasn't convinced yet. "Not Ruby," he said. "Not my wife. I know all about her. Her birthday, where she was born——"

"You *think* you know it. You don't really."

"But she never said a word to me about the generator. It came out of my head and my head only."

"She put it there. I'll tell you something else; I believe the girls themselves know nothing about their true identity. They've been conditioned to think and act like terrestrials so that they can't give themselves away by a false move."

"If you're right," said Donovan pensively, "I'm going to hate giving up Ruby."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't exactly hate Sherry."

Donovan pulled back his shoulders and relaxed them with a sigh of determination. "There's one thing that couldn't be faked, one thing that would make or break your fool notion. Records!"

"Personnel files? What reason would anybody have had for checking them? I don't deny it could happen sooner or later, but this machine we've built between us has been developed so fast I would say they intend to use it before anybody checks the records."

Donovan smiled with a hint of triumph. "I was thinking of marriage records."

He had me there. I yielded the point, picked up his phone and asked the operator to put me through to the place where tabs are kept on a man from birth to death. When I got my number and stated my piece, I was told it would take time; they would ring me back. I said thank you and took Lincoln's notes from my pocket. I gave them to Donovan.

"How long would it take you to duplicate that?" I asked.

"Not very long. A few hours."

"Will anybody ask questions when you ask your stores people for the stuff you will need?"

"I have a *certain* amount of authority," he said stiffly.

"Then get me a few things at the same time. While you make Lincoln's gadget, I'm going to duplicate the matter transmitter. And I'm going to modify it to take all the power your generator can push out. So far we've been used without a by-your-leave. We're going to hit back and do a little using ourselves. Let's get the three machines combined as they were meant to be. Let's find out where the thing transmits to, and what it was meant to transmit."

"Or receive," said Donovan for the second time. He added, "I'll play along with you for one reason only—my own peace of mind.

You've stated a pretty authenticated case but I'm keeping an open mind about it meantime; until we've built the machine and heard from the place you phoned."

Both items took longer than we had estimated. The phone didn't ring until early next morning, at the end of my second day without sleep and an hour before we had the three units tied together.

The information from records didn't prove or disprove a thing. They gave us six family trees. Everybody was legitimate, Lincoln, Donovan, myself and our women.

Donovan was elated. His elation was easily damped.

"We should have foreseen this," I said. "Of course the aliens wouldn't be so careless as not to cover the possibility of their past being investigated. They took someone else's statistics. There *were* three women working in three factories as secretaries—but not these three. You can take your pick as to what happened to the originals. If they aren't dead, they've been abducted and hidden away until the aliens are ready to change places again."

Donovan took it quietly. He said nothing, just tightened his mouth and worked a little faster. I had completed my own unit and watched him work. He didn't have much more to do. I could see that from experience. That is a gift

that comes only from experience—the ability to look at a strange machine and tell when it is complete and when there is something missing.

I saw something else. “Donovan,” I said. “Why are you using deltathene insulators in Lincoln’s unit?”

“They’re better than the ones he specified.”

“How do you know? It’s his invention, not yours. And how did you come to have so many insulators left over? Why did you order ten thousand when you needed only about a quarter of them?”

He looked up. “I’m not sure,” he said. “Probably I thought at the time that a smaller order would look suspicious. After all, this wasn’t for the company, it was my own. Yes, that’s it, a smaller order wouldn’t have been typical of Celestine.”

He saw something on my face that had just arrived. He followed my gaze to the unit I had made. “You’ve used them, too!” he said.

I nodded. “Between us, we have nearly accounted for the entire ten thousand. It’s . . . it’s as if you were meant to order that many.”

“Under Ruby’s influence? Your notions are beginning to fall apart, Macnamara. How long have you been with me in this room? Twenty-four hours. In those twenty-four hours we—or you mostly—have figured out the true

function of three new inventions. Further, we have rebuilt two of them, with improvements. And all without as much as the presence of the women you say are aliens.”

“We could have been given the know-how earlier, any time in the last three weeks.”

“You sound as if you didn’t believe that yourself!”

“I want to. Because if I don’t . . . what else?”

We knew what else.

Donovan’s fingers flew over the last few connections. We were only minutes from the truth. We knew the picture I had drawn of the aliens was nearly correct. All that remained was to name the aliens. There was nothing in my picture which couldn’t be applied equally well to Donovan, myself and the late Lincoln.

We learned the truth almost simultaneously from two sources. First, the phone rang. I took up the receiver; the voice was familiar. It wasn’t so long since I had last heard it.

“Who was it?” asked Donovan.

“She rang half an hour ago. This time she wanted to know what connection we had with Lincoln. The hospital found something unusual about Lincoln’s body, enough to tell them it wasn’t one of the local species. They tried to find out more about him, his parentage mostly. The girl remembered our call and now they want to ask us

questions. They have also contacted the security people. At a guess, I should say we had better be out of here within the next ten minutes."

"Where can we go? And how?"

"Start the generator."

"I'm not going anywhere without Ruby——"

"Start it!"

Later I realised we had not bothered to set Lincoln's transmitter beam in any particular direction. But I also realised that our random setting wasn't so random as we thought at the time.

At the touch of the switch it became obvious that there was a similar machine somewhere, one that was a transmitter to our receiver. It was transmitting nothing material, only a sound, the sound of one word.

With all its twenty-six letters, the alphabet of the English language cannot duplicate that word. But Donovan and I recognised it.

It was the keyword for unlocking our conditioned minds.

We looked at each other and shrugged. "I don't know about you," said Donovan, "but I've got a let-down anticlimax feeling. I suppose I should be shocked to learn that I'm an alien, but I'm not."

"You'll have to drop that way of thinking. There has been a change of circumstances. We are . . . what

we are, in an alien world. I hope you haven't forgotten that we haven't finished our task yet."

"Task? I don't even know why we came here, except that I am to take instructions from you."

The voice from across space broke in: "Initiative test passed with full marks, but failure to return immediately will result in low grading."

I moved in front of Donovan and kicked off the switch. "Now do you remember?" I said. "The pass to glory? You trying for the second time, poor Lincoln making his ninth attempt, and me in charge because this is my first go."

Donovan nodded. "I remember. We've passed. The gates are open. With the emigration initiative test behind us, we can join the Galactics."

"If you still want to," I said. "Since birth we've been indoctrinated to aim for one goal, the right to join the settlements on the new galaxy—the promised land. We've made it. All we have to do is use this transmitter to go home. But it will mean leaving Ruby and Sherry. The local security men will be here any second. There isn't time to collect the girls."

Donovan was grim. "And what about the real Donovan and Macnamara? We can't leave them wandering around with induced amnesia."

I grinned. "That's what I was

thinking. You know, we never yet met anybody who had been to the galactic settlements and come back to sing their praises. The whole thing is only a promise. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if there aren't any settlements. I don't believe the elders care whether we return or not."

"Why go to all this bother?"

"Think how it was back home. We had everything, material wealth, technical saturation. These things didn't hurt us any, but there was no adventure left, no stimulation. So the galactic settlements were instituted. They were supposed to be on planets of stars in the next galaxy, rugged planets which promised a life of hard work, danger, adventure—all the stimulation you could ask for. But to qualify for the settlements you have to prove yourself first. You have to pass an initiative test. Dumped on a strange planet, you have to make your own way home. If you fail the test, they pick you up and your reward has been the joy of trying. If you get home and there are galactic settlements, you are likewise happy. But just think, Donovan——"

He was with me. "If we decide to stay here we are choosing a planet far behind ours in scientific technique, a land without plenty, a world where nothing falls into your lap unless you work for it. And nobody back home would be the loser."

"Can you fix this machine to blow up?" I asked.

"Easily. Just short those connections. But we can't do it. Five thousand people work here and there's a reactor in the generator."

"We've got to destroy it somehow, Donovan. If we leave it somebody will figure out its purpose and we'll have put this planet centuries ahead."

"What of it? It will make up for some of the things we've done, abducting Donovan and——"

I shook my head. "If we leave this machine to the locals we would soon be living in a world not unlike our own. We would be back where we started. And if it's worrying you any, I know where to find the men whose places we took, complete with their memories. How heavy is the generator? Will it go in your car? You have a car?"

He whipped off the casing without answering and proceeded to remove all but the innermost shielding. I followed his lead and smashed Lincoln's beaming unit. A fistful of wires torn from the matter transmitter and it was reduced to anonymity. We lugged the heart of his generator into his car and left the factory as fast as the car would travel. A big black car passed us at the gates.

Twenty miles into the countryside we left a noise, a crater and a rising cloud shaped like a mushroom.

"Are you going to tell the girls?" Donovan asked.

"And lose them?" I said. "Later perhaps. It's too soon yet. Give them time to discover that we are as human as we are. Give them time to fall in love again. Don't forget they married us under compulsion although they don't know it yet. Then when we do tell them, they won't shrink away because of any pre-conceived notions about aliens. I don't want to lose Sherry. Not ever, and particularly not at this moment."

"What do you mean?"

"During the next few months we'll need the girls for the same reason we married them—for protective colouring. We were accepted as Donovan and Macnamara at the factories because we conditioned everybody to think we were them, and because we knew their life stories. And with Terran wives to learn the finer points of local customs from, we were securely submerged."

Donovan was at the wheel. He had been following my directions. He eased up on the accelerator as we breasted a rise and swung into the narrow main street of a village. I told him when to stop.

When I came out of the cottage hospital I said: "I've been doing a little hypnotic suggestion. Donovan and Macnamara will get their senses back in twenty-four hours from now. They will remember who they are long enough to

get to work. Then the second part of the suggestion will obliterate the events of the past three weeks. I think they are both sufficiently intelligent to pick up the threads from there. If security people are looking for Donovan and Macnamara, that is exactly who they will find. They'll find them perfectly normal humans."

"What about Lincoln, the real one?"

"I was worried about him. However, the problem solved itself. He died last week—a natural death. He wasn't young."

Donovan reversed the car in a churchyard and headed back the way we had come. He looked full of happy anticipation. "All set now, Mac?"

"Almost. There might be snoopers around already. We'll have to move fast. Pick up the girls and whisk them, and ourselves, out of sight until the hue and cry is over. Then we'll have to start building new lives. We'll have to take ordinary jobs, take care never to be brilliant. We'll have to work hard for a living."

If anything, Donovan's grin widened. "Know what?" he said. "It wouldn't be a bad idea to take the girls on a second honeymoon."

He nearly turned the car into the roadside when I punched his shoulder. "That's right," I said. "One that we'll remember this time!"

BOOKS

by **ALEC F. HARBY**

FLYING SAUCERS HAVE LANDED by Desmond Leslie and George Adamski. Panther Books, 2s. 6d., 237 pages, illustrated.

If ever a book could be said to have started a cult, it is this one in which George Adamski swears that he has had actual, physical contact with an extra-terrestrial being. He states that he questioned a member of the crew of a flying saucer, that the being came from Venus, that he entered into telepathic communication with him, obtained photographic evidence of the visitation and, more, has six witnesses who have signed an affidavit with him as to the truth of his testimony.

Since the book first appeared a lot of people have gone to a lot of trouble in an effort to "prove" Adamski's photographic evidence to be false. They have also "proved" that a large percentage of all reported sighting of flying saucers can be explained as other than what they are claimed to be and who are firmly convinced that

Adamski has attempted a gigantic hoax. Together with these people are others who are just as firmly convinced that Adamski spoke the simple truth and, in support of their claims, point to the unexplained percentage of sightings.

The first part of the book, contributed by Desmond Leslie, concerns itself with such sightings and gives a comprehensive background of flying saucer history reaching back for a surprisingly long time. Adamski's claims take up the second part, and whether truth or hoax, should be read by everyone before they can set themselves up either to condemn or praise him.

This is one bargain you can't afford to miss.

THE FLYING SAUCER CONSPIRACY by Donald E. Keyhoe. Michael Joseph Ltd., 12s. 6d., 248 pages.

When an ex-officer of the U.S. Marine Corps sets himself in op-

AUTHENTIC SCIENCE FICTION

position with his own government it is reasonable to assume that he knows what he is doing. Major (retired) Donald E. Keyhoe is fighting such a one-man war with what he terms the "silence group," those responsible for the censorship of all reports connected with U.F.O.'s—Unidentified Flying Objects, or Flying Saucers. And it is his contention that those in authority know a great deal more about such objects than they want, or intend, to tell.

As proof of his statements he quotes official documents, directives and orders all aimed at the imposing of such a censorship. He also tells of his own battles with the "silence group," the manner in which they have decried the possibility of extra-terrestrial visitors and the clamping down on publicity. He gives times, places and names. He records several incidents and the resultant follow-up publicity released by the Services, publicity which, on the face of it, is ridiculous. He also raises several points and mentions certain investigations which, if true, are startling in their import.

For example; Keyhoe states that at least two artificial satellites have been plotted orbiting the Earth. That definite signs of artificial constructions have been spotted on the Moon and that inexplicable phenomena have been noted on Mars. He also asserts

that several aircraft have been destroyed by too-close proximity with flying saucers, and that, while observable on radar, many such U.F.O.'s are invisible to the naked eye.

Keyhoe doesn't concern himself with "little Green Men," and admits that many such reports could be due to hysteria or a desire for publicity. What does concern him is the mounting pile of evidence that something is being deliberately kept from the public, and, naturally, he wants to know why.

I'd like to know why, too. I'd also like to know why, if Keyhoe is the nuisance he appears to be to the "silence group," they haven't inducted him into the forces and gagged him with the American equivalent to the Official Secrets Act.

But don't let me give you the impression that this is a book written by a crank, for cranks. Just the opposite. It is extremely well written, holds the interest with evidence which is almost overwhelming and the conclusions shriek for an answer. If Keyhoe is right in his assumptions then there is a top-level, world-wide conspiracy to keep us in ignorance about what may be going on.

I find that possibility more disquieting than that we may be on the verge of contact with beings from other worlds.



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THE ISOTOPE MAN by Charles Eric Maine. Hodder & Stoughton, 11s. 6d., 189 pages.

Everyone likes a fast, well-written story and with this book the author continues the success of his earlier novels: *Spaceways*, *Timeliner*, *Escapement* and *Crisis 2,000*. This novel is based on the author's screen play, *Timeslip*, and is an ingenious tale of a man who should have been dead but wasn't, and who suffered from a seven-and-a-half-second slip in time.

Add to this sabotage, a spy hunt, a too-inquisitive reporter and plenty of action and you have something worth reading. The book also has one of the most attractive jackets I've seen for a long time.

THUNDER AND ROSES by Theodore Sturgeon. Michael Joseph Ltd., 12s. 6d., 255 pages.

Of the eight stories of this collection, the title story was, and still is, my favourite. It is a grimly logical tale of what could happen after the alphabet bombs have fallen on America and the future of the world depends on non-retaliation. The moralizing isn't deep, but it's there, together with some unforgettable characters.

The one I liked least, both on its first appearance and now, is . . . *And My Fear Is Great*, a

tedious tale of a bitch of a spinster, a crumb with unsuspected psi powers and a character-change which somehow just doesn't ring true.

Of the rest, *Mewhu's Jet* deals with a stranger from space, his rather peculiar machine and a neatly logical ending. *The Hurkle Is A Happy Beast* is zany humour and shows one way in which aliens could conquer the Earth. *Minority Report* is what happens when men venture into space to find that there is a very good reason why other races haven't been dropping in for social visits; while *Bulkhead* is an awkward, soul-searching thing about a man who finds that his best friend is, naturally, himself.

Tiny and the Monster and *A Way Home* complete the book, the first about a visiting alien and the other about a boy who ran away from home only to find that home was really the place he wanted to run to.

Any anthology is in the nature of a lucky dip, and this collection is no exception. As the stories were written over a great many years they represent almost a cross-section of the writer, but not, unfortunately, of his best work.

If you haven't read the stories you won't regret buying the book; if you've read them and are a completist you'll want it anyway.